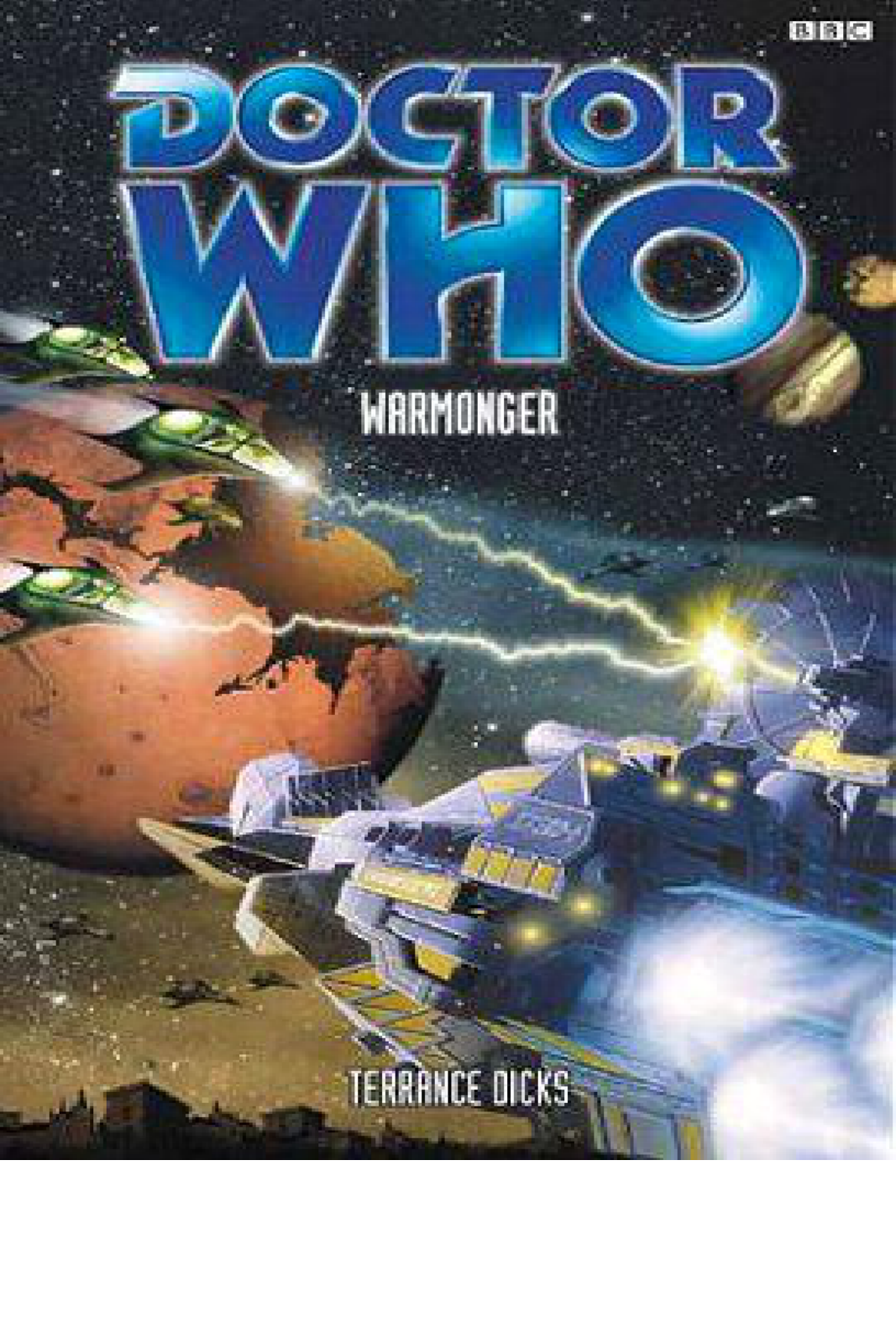


DOCTOR WHO

WARMONGER

TERRANCE DICKS

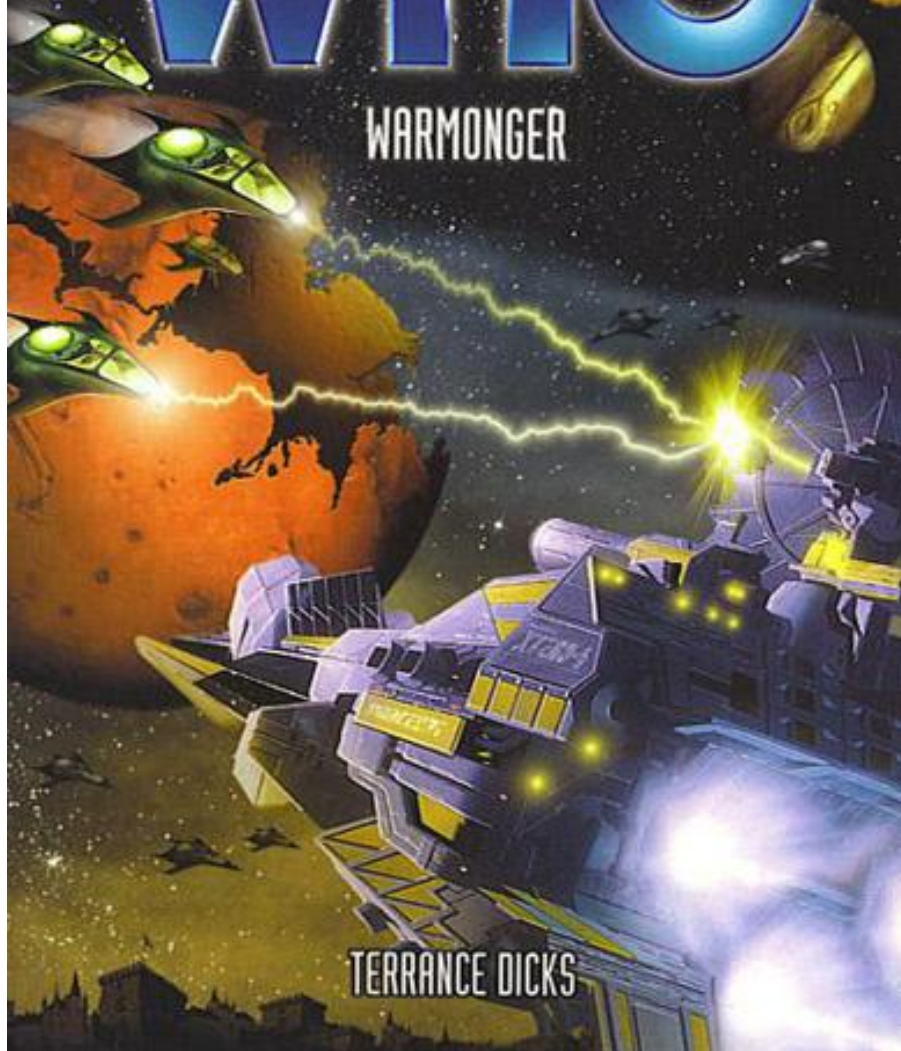


BBC

DOCTOR WHO

WARMONGER

TERRANCE DICKS





'This is High Treason, and for this you deserve death. However, in view of your past service, the sentence is commuted to exile. You leave Gallifrey this day, never to return.'

A chain of events has been set in motion that will change the Doctor and Peri forever. A chain that involves old enemies as well as old friends.

How did Peri come to be the leader of a gang of rebel fighters on an outlying planet? Who is the mysterious 'General' against whom they are rebelling so violently? Where does the so-called 'Supremo', leader of the Alliance forces ranged against the General, come from, and why is he so interested in Peri?

The answers lie in the origins of a conflict that will affect the whole cosmos – a conflict that will find humans, Sontarans, Draconians and even Cybermen fighting together for the greater good and glory. For the Supremo.

It is a conflict that will test both the Doctor and Peri to the limit, and bring them face to face with the dark sides of their own personalities.

This adventure features the Fifth Doctor and Peri.

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DOCTOR WHO



WARMONGER

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To the memory of

Bob Holmes,

best of Doctor Who writers,

and to

Robin Bland,

without whose brief but glorious career this book could not have been written, and to

Justin Richards,

who likes every story to have

a beginning, middle and, especially an end, but not necessarily in that order!

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Prologue

In the Panopticon on Gallifrey, great events were coming to a climax.

The vast circular hall, so immense that clouds formed in its domed ceiling, was packed, every Time Lord in his appointed place.

All but one.

The President's place on the central dais was empty.

The brightly coloured, high-collared ceremonial robes of the Time Lords seemed to shimmer in the diffused light of the hall.

The orange and scarlet of the Prydonians vied with the green of the Arcalians, the heliotrope of the Patrexes dominated the more subdued colours of the lesser chapters.

All eyes were fixed on the great staircase that led down to the central dais. It was from this dais that the President of the Council traditionally addressed his fellow Time Lords. Two of them stood waiting now.

One was a tall, white-haired old man in the ornate red and gold robes of the Vice-President.

The other was a slender, dark-haired figure in the sober grey robe of a Junior Cardinal.

A stir of movement at the top of the great staircase caught everyone's eye. Three figures came down it. The one in the lead wore the robes of the President of Gallifrey, and bore the insignia of his office – the Coronet, the Sash and the Rod of Rassilon.

He had, however, no need of robes or insignia to impress.

Slightly under medium height with a high domed head and classically handsome features, he exuded an effortless charisma, an authority that made him the focus of the entire Panopticon.

Behind him came two armed officers of the Chancellery Guard. They might have been his bodyguards, except that such a function was almost unknown on Gallifrey. In fact they were simply his guards.

The Time Lord in presidential robes stopped when he reached the two waiting figures. He spoke, briefly and contemptuously. 'Well?'

In a high, old voice the Vice-President said, 'The decision of the High Council is unanimous, Lord President. You are hereby deposed.'

The Junior Cardinal's voice, by contrast, was hard and strong.

'From this moment, you are no longer President of Gallifrey.'

Vice-President Saran will assume your position until new elections are held.'

Moving forward, the Junior Cardinal reached for the Sash of Rassilon. Furiously the ex-president thrust him away. The guards stepped forward, seizing the ex-President's arms.

With ruthless speed and efficiency, the Junior Cardinal stripped the ex-President of Coronet, Sash and Rod.

Turning to Saran, he invested the old man with the insignia of his new rank. He stepped back and his voice rang out.

'Time Lords! Acknowledge your President!'

To a Time Lord, the vast audience rose, holding high their right hands.

'Hail Lord President Saran!'

With a rustling of robes, they resumed their places.

The deposed President watched the ceremony in scornful silence.

Shaking off the restraining guards, he said, ‘Saran, you’re a senile old fool. Do you really think you can fill my place?’ He swung round on the Junior Cardinal. ‘You were always an ambitious young swine. I suppose you think you’ll be wearing the President’s robes after the election? You’re behind all this!’

‘I had the honour to chair the Committee of Enquiry into your – activities,’ said the Junior Cardinal calmly. ‘It was scarcely difficult to uncover evidence of abuse of office. And once your fellow conspirators in the Celestial Intervention Agency had confessed...’

‘You spineless fools! I would have made our Time Lord race masters of the galaxy – of the cosmos. Now you will degenerate into useless, passive – *observers*.’ As he spat out the last word, his voice dripped with scorn.

‘The prisoner will be silent,’ said President Saran. There was unexpected authority in the old voice. ‘You sought to lead us into a policy of war and conquest that would have brought devastation to the galaxy and eventual ruin to our race. This is High Treason, and for this you deserve death. However, in view of your past service to Gallifrey, the sentence is commuted to exile – permanent exile. You leave Gallifrey this day, never to return.’

Shocked gasps and murmurs filled the Panopticon Hall. In the minds of some of the assembled Time Lords, death would have been more merciful. To any Time Lord, Gallifrey is a part of his very being. Even the few, the very few, who rebelled and left voluntarily, held the knowledge in their secret hearts that some day they would return. Permanent exile was death of the soul. The ex-President, however, heard the sentence with apparent equanimity. His eyes ranged over the audience as he addressed them for the last time.

‘You are making a mistake – a grave mistake. For the moment, I say only this. I shall return to Gallifrey, at a time of my own choosing.’ He paused, his glance sweeping over the crowded assembly. Curiously, every Time Lord in the crowded hall felt that the burning stare was directed at him, and at him alone.

‘I shall return to Gallifrey,’ he repeated. ‘And I shall not come alone.’

He turned and began to climb the long staircase, followed by his guards.

Lord President Saran turned to the Junior Cardinal. ‘Well, it’s over.’

The Junior Cardinal sent a scornful look after the deposed President. 'Theatrical to the last!'

'All the same, he had great talents,' said Saran thoughtfully.

'And in many ways his judgement was excellent.'

'I don't follow, Lord President.'

Saran smiled amiably down at him. 'You really do hope to replace me at the election – though you won't. And you really are an ambitious young swine, Borusa.'

Junior Cardinal Borusa held his gaze for a moment and then bowed low. 'I wish only to serve, my Lord President. To serve you – and Gallifrey.'

In perfect understanding, they turned and left the dais.

Book I

Guerrilla

Chapter One

Ambush

'We're all going to die,' thought Peri. 'Maybe not today – but soon – very soon.'

Oddly enough, the thought gave a kind of relief. They had been fighting so long, so hopelessly, the odds against survival lengthening every day. Like everyone else, Peri was exhausted, sick of running and hiding and killing. They couldn't win. But they wouldn't give in.

'We shall fight them in the jungles and in the deserts, on the rivers and on the lagoons,' thought Peri. 'We shall never surrender.' She paused, frowning. 'Somebody else said that –

something very like it anyway.'

She wiped the sweat from her forehead. Even crouching motionless was exhausting in the steamy tropical heat. She wondered about the strength of the forces against them. With any luck..

The army of the enemy was vast, but his empire was expanding at an astonishing rate, planet after planet falling to his invading hordes. The

conquering army swept on – but the occupying forces left to hold each captured planet were stretched very thin.

It was the only thing that gave Peri and her companions any chance.

There were six of them, half a dozen ragged guerrillas, waiting in ambush on the overgrown jungle trail that led to the enemy's main jungle base. The hovertrain, due any moment, would be carrying weapons, food, medical supplies, all desperately needed by the enemy troops.

The guerrillas needed them even more.

Peri heard a distant rustling, the sound of jungle vegetation ruthlessly brushed aside by some heavy moving object. 'Right, they're coming,' she said. 'Positions everyone. Marko, you set off that mine too early and I'll make you wish you'd stayed down the salt mines!'

The hairy giant grinned. 'Yes, boss.'

'Nothing to laugh about,' whispered Kyrin, her second-in-command. 'She means it!'

Kyrin was an alley-cat, lean and scarred and a ferocious fighter.

Timing was important because they only had two mines. The first was to blow up the head of the hovertrain, stopping and disabling it; the second would be exploded behind it to prevent retreat. Hovertrains had engines at both ends.

Gina, the rear lookout, came slipping through the dense jungle.

'Just round the next bend.'

'Right,' said Peri. 'Stand by. Positions everyone.'

Gina nodded silently and disappeared into the jungle. Crop-haired and skeletally thin, she seldom spoke.

They strung themselves out along the path and waited, motionless, dripping with sweat in the oppressive heat.

Peri reviewed her plan. She'd deliberately chosen to attack when the hovertrain had almost reached the enemy base. The dangers of the journey apparently over, the guards would be relaxed, perhaps careless.

Moments later the front of the hovertrain appeared, sliding silently along the jungle path like a giant black snake.

It was an all-terrain vehicle, heavily armoured, and it was a tough nut to crack. Attacked from the front, the hovertrain could instantly reverse... You had to disable both ends simultaneously. Gina was in charge of the second mine, she wouldn't panic. But Marko could be impulsive...

Peri crouched down as the shiny black bulk of the hovertrain slid by. She watched as its head reached and passed the mine-point.

'Too late, Marko, you great ape,' she screamed silently.

The solid thump of the first mine interrupted her thoughts, followed immediately by the sound of the second.

The hovertrain convulsed like a worm cut into writhing segments by a spade, front and rear control cabins neatly severed.

The guerrillas descended upon the hovertrain just as doors slid back along its length and a handful of outraged, grey-uniformed guards jumped out of the train.

Concentrated blaster-fire from the guerrillas mowed them down. Their bodies jerked and twisted in a grotesque dance, then slumped to the ground.

Peri cupped her hands round her mouth and yelled, 'Marko, Gina, well done! Get the corn-units!'

Marko and Gina were already sprinting for the severed control cabins. Seconds were precious now. The longer the enemy troops at the nearby base were confused about what was happening, the longer it would take them to organise a proper pursuit.

Led by Kyrin, the remaining guerrillas, a stocky ex-farmer called Brand and a bean-pole of a student called Lon, ran towards the storage compartments. In a well-rehearsed sequence of actions, they blasted open doors and loaded supplies into the huge empty rucksacks on their backs. Their tasks completed, Marko and Gina joined in. Peri watched the process with satisfaction. It was, she thought, a nice, well-organised little train robbery. Jesse James would have been proud of her.

Suddenly a guard sprang from the wrecked hovertrain and sprinted

along the path. Young and terrified-looking, he'd obviously stayed in hiding, waiting for his chance.

Automatically, Peri unslung the laser-rifle from her shoulder and took aim. The guard was running for the nearby base. He might even reach it, give the alarm.

She focused the white dot of the aiming system between his shoulder-blades. A touch on the firing-stud and the guard was dead. Peri hesitated, shifted her aim a fraction and fired. The laser-blast zipped past the boy's ear and he accelerated his pace and disappeared round the bend in the track.

Staggering under the weight of his loaded backpack, Kyrin ran towards her, Marko close behind him. She saw the reproach in Kyrin's eyes.

'You can shoot better than that, boss.'

Peri re-slung her rifle. 'He was just a kid. By the time he reaches the base, we'll be long gone.'

'*He'd* be long gone if it was up to me.'

Kyrin had seen his wife and children massacred by the invading troops. He was all out of sympathy for the enemy.

Peri pointed to Kyrin's backpack. 'That thing's bigger than you are. Where's my one?'

Kyrin shook his head, tapped his forehead. 'Nah. We sweat, you think. That's what you're good at. Marko'll carry yours.'

Marko nodded. 'No problem. Carry you as well if you like.'

Peri shook her head, but she knew they were right. Planning and rehearsal, everyone given a specific job, kept them successful

– and alive. Her job was to see that everyone else did theirs. And she couldn't think straight if she was exhausted.

'Right, everyone loaded? Let's move.'

Peri checked her wrist-compass and led them off through the jungle. She set a killing pace but nobody complained. The second part of her plan depended on speed. The enemy would expect the guerrillas to put as much distance between themselves and the scene of the attack

as possible. They would set up cordons ahead, and the pursuing troops from the outpost would rush forward at top speed, eager to catch up.

Peri was heading for a nearby mountain range, not far from the base. Its lower slopes were riddled with caves. It was an obvious hiding place but, Peri hoped, too obvious, too close to the scene of the attack. With any luck the first wave of the pursuit would sweep right over them, rushing ahead until it collided with the distant cordon. Only then would the troops turn back for a slower, more thorough search. By then the guerrillas would be long gone...

Two-thirds of the way to the cave the loaded-down guerrillas were flagging and Peri ordered a short break. Crouched in the heart of a thorn thicket, just off the trail, the guerrillas guzzled unaccustomed luxuries – one of the hovertrain's storage compartments had held luxuries for the officer's mess.

Peri swallowed a mouthful of smoked *zargil*, a swamp fish of legendary ferocity. Its smoked flesh was a rare delicacy – rare because of its tendency to eat the fisherman. She washed it down with a swig of *akkeen*, a local brandy reputed to burn holes in armour-plating. She gasped and choked and passed the flask to Marko, who promptly drained it.

Kyrin held up a hand for silence. 'Listen.'

They heard a distant rustling and crashing, the sound of troops on the move. The sound came closer and then veered away, eventually fading into silence. Only the background sounds of the jungle remained, the constant hissing, growling, snarling and roaring of a hundred mostly hostile life-forms.

'They've lost us,' said Kyrin contemptuously. 'City-bred clods.'

'Don't underestimate them,' said Peri. 'They've started using *zarak* guides.'

The *zarak* were the planet's aboriginals, a slender green-skinned race, driven deeper and deeper into the jungles by the spread of cultivated land.

Kyrin gave her an incredulous stare. 'Never. The *zarak* hate the invaders.'

'They hate the settlers as well,' said Peri. 'They don't much care which of us kills which. Besides, they bribe them with *akkeen*.'

‘That’s wicked,’ said Lon. ‘*Akkeen’s* poison to the *zarak*.

They get addicted and die in weeks.’

‘Doesn’t bother the invaders,’ said Peri. ‘There are plenty more *zarak*.’

They reached the caves just before nightfall, and scrambled up the rocky slope to the one Peri had chosen. It was longer and deeper than the others, more of a tunnel than a cave, and it twisted deep inside the mountain. By hiding in its furthest recesses they might even escape a cursory search.

Peri produced a torch and led the way into the cave. Narrow at first, it widened around each bend. It ended in a circular chamber, big enough for all of them. They could hide out here for days if necessary. After all they had plenty of supplies...

Suddenly she stopped. ‘Wait, everyone.’

They stopped and waited.

‘What is it?’ whispered Kyrin.

Peri shone the torch around the rocky walls. ‘I’m not sure.

There’s something different. Something in the air...’

She sniffed and caught a faint tang of – what? Sweat?

Leather? Gun-oil? Or was it a mixture of all three?

She turned to the others. ‘There’s someone here. .’

A blinding light blazed in front of them. Behind the light were the dimly seen shapes of grey-clad figures.

‘Get out,’ shouted Peri. ‘It’s a trap.’

They turned to run, and another light blazed behind them.

‘That’s right, it’s a trap,’ boomed a magnified voice. ‘And you’re in it. Lay down your arms. Resistance, if I may say so, is useless.’

Peri heard Kyrin’s urgent voice in her ear.

‘Go down fighting, boss, take a few of them with us?’

Peri considered for a moment and then shook her head. It would be a pointless massacre. She unslung her laser-rifle and dropped it on the ground. There was a clatter as the others threw down their weapons.

All except Brand. Raising his blaster, he fired at the figures behind the spotlight. Blaster-fire rang out instantaneously.

Brand's body jerked and he fell to the ground. Next to him Lon staggered, then he too fell.

With a roar of rage, Marko charged at the shadowy figures, only to be shot down in turn.

Kyrin knelt quickly and examined the bodies. 'Dead. All three of them.'

A fair-haired, blue-eyed young Lieutenant stepped from behind the field spotlight, a megaphone in his hand, glancing casually down at the three bodies.

'So they are.'

'That wasn't necessary,' said Peri furiously. 'Lon had surrendered.'

'But the other two hadn't,' the Lieutenant pointed out. 'Your friend got caught in the crossfire. I wouldn't worry about it.'

'Three of my friends are dead –'

'That's right. You three will be dead as well very soon. It's only a matter of time.'

Chapter Two

Captured

Surrounded by grey-clad guards, the three surviving guerrillas were marched back to the scene of their crime, where a floodlit breakdown squad was re-coupling the severed control cabins.

They were marched down the track to the nearby base, a series of huge grey plastisteel domes in a recently hacked-out jungle clearing.

Inside, the domes were divided and subdivided into a maze of corridors, barracks, store-rooms, mess-halls and offices. They were taken to the big central dome, shoved into a bare, echoing entrance foyer and roughly searched for concealed weapons.

Then they were marched along endless corridors into a big office, where a tired-looking, grey-haired, grey-uniformed man sat behind a desk. Two armed guards stationed themselves at the door.

The young lieutenant escorting them saluted.

‘Your plan was successful, Commandant. We got the entire band.’

The Commandant looked up. ‘Is this all of them?’

‘All that’s left of them, sir. Three of the men had to be killed.

These are the three survivors.’

The Commandant looked thoughtfully at the bedraggled little group. He nodded towards Kyrin.

‘You, I take it, are the famous Commander Peri?’

‘No,’ said Peri. ‘I am.’

He raised his eyebrows in mild surprise.

‘I am Commandant Nadir of the Freedomian Occupation Force. There were only six of you?’

‘We started out with twelve.’

‘Even so, yours is a remarkably small group to have caused us so much trouble.’

‘We did our best.’

The lieutenant stepped forward and gave her a savage cuff on the ear that sent her staggering. ‘We don’t need your rebel insolence.’

‘We don’t need pointless brutality either,’ said the Commandant. His voice was mild, but the lieutenant snapped to attention, his face pale.

‘My apologies, Commandant.’

‘The young lady will not be with us much longer,’ the Commandant went on. ‘The least we can do is treat her with the military courtesy due to a worthy opponent. She and her ragged little band have tied down a considerable number of troops for some considerable time – ever since we landed in fact. No mean achievement.’ He turned to Peri. ‘I’m curious as to your history.’

You're not a settler, are you? We can find no trace of you on their database.'

'I'm just an innocent bystander,' said Peri. 'I'm from Old Earth originally, though I've travelled a lot. I arrived here more or less by accident. I was still here when your battle fleet landed and started occupying towns and villages.'

'If you're no more than a chance visitor here, how did you become involved in the guerrilla movement?' asked the Commandant. He seemed genuinely interested.

'I didn't like the way your occupying troops were treating people. Some friends of mine were beaten up, one of them was raped...'

'There are always regrettable excesses in the first stages of an invasion.'

'No doubt. Anyway, I was getting more and more angry but I didn't get round to doing anything about it. Nobody was actually bothering me.'

'What changed things?'

'Something quite trivial. I was sitting in a cafe when I overheard Kyrin here and some others planning an attack on an arms convoy. The plan was so ramshackle that it was bound to fail. I couldn't resist telling them so.' Despite the grim circumstances, Peri smiled, remembering. 'Kyrin said since I was such a smartass, why didn't I come up with a better plan?'

'And?'

'And I did. It all sort of went on from there.'

'Fascinating,' said the Commandant. 'You obviously have a natural talent for guerrilla warfare. I'm sorry to have to cut short such a promising career.'

'There'll be others to take our place.'

The Commandant shook his head. 'I'm afraid not. Yours is – was – the last active group of guerrillas operating in my territory.'

Peri rubbed her still-stinging ear. 'How did you catch us?'

‘I out-thought you,’ said the Commandant. ‘I studied your record, your methods of attack and realised that you specialised in the unexpected. So I leaked news of the supply hovertrain for bait and worked out what you’d do next – and you did the unexpected – as usual. The attack close to the base instead of deep in the jungle. The hiding-place close to the attack point, instead of somewhere far away... I reconnoitred the terrain and found the caves. It was obvious which one you’d use. I told Lieutenant Hakon where to place his troops and then waited.

And here you are.’

‘If the supply hovertrain was only bait, why wasn’t it empty?’

asked Peri. ‘Why risk precious supplies?’

‘Thoroughness,’ said the Commandant. ‘If the train had been empty, you might conceivably have learnt of it. If you’d attacked and found it empty, you’d have realised something was wrong and altered your escape plan. There has to be bait in a trap.’

Peri nodded. ‘Well, congratulations. I must remember to be more conventional next time.’

‘I’m afraid there will be no next time,’ said the Commandant.

‘What are you going to do with us?’ growled Kyrin.

The Commandant looked mildly surprised. ‘Shoot you, of course.’

‘When?’ asked Peri.

‘Dawn tomorrow. We like to keep up the old military traditions.’

‘You call that justice?’ shouted Kyrin. ‘Don’t we even get a trial?’

‘This was your trial,’ said the Commandant. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m a busy man. Lieutenant, find them somewhere to sleep and see that they get a decent supper.’

‘And a hearty breakfast?’ suggested Peri.

The Commandant smiled thinly. ‘And, of course, a hearty breakfast. And be careful, Lieutenant. They’re to be kept under close guard at all times – particularly their leader. Don’t underestimate her.’

‘Don’t worry, sir, I think I can handle her.’

The Commandant nodded. 'Firing squad straight after reveille tomorrow.'

Hakon saluted. 'Sir!' He turned to the guerrillas. 'Come on you lot, move!'

They filed out. As she passed Lieutenant Hakon, Peri, who was last in line, put her hand to her head, staggered as if dizzy and fell against him. She clutched at his lapels to steady herself –

and her knee flashed up, hard and fast.

Hakon gasped and doubled up, clutching his groin.

The guards at the door raised their blasters – then lowered them at a gesture from the Commandant.

Painfully the Lieutenant straightened up, clawing for the holstered blaster in his belt.

'You'll suffer for that, you bitch.'

Peri stepped back, spreading her hands.

'What are you going to do, Lieutenant? Shoot me?'

'You'll be glad to die by the time I've finished with you.'

'Let's not be precipitate, Lieutenant,' said the Commandant.

'I warned you to be careful. Now, take them away and follow my orders.'

'Sir,' said Hakon sulkily.

'And Lieutenant?'

'Sir?'

'You will follow my orders – *exactly*, please. It's our duty to kill these people, we don't have to brutalise them.'

They were marched along endless corridors and finally shoved into an empty store-room at the edge of the base. Flanked by two armed guards, Lieutenant Hakon halted them outside the door, and stood surveying his captives, as if reluctant to be parted from them.

His eyes fixed on Gina. 'You're not too bad. A bit skinny, but not too bad. Fancy a good time before you go?'

He grabbed her by the chin, raising her face to his.

Gina's slender body went rigid and she began to shudder.

Her big eyes stared blankly ahead.

Puzzled and repelled, Hakon released her. 'What's the matter with her?'

'She can't stand to be touched,' said Peri.

'Why not?'

'She was gang-raped by some of your troops when the first wave landed.'

'Some girls have all the luck,' said Hakon. He grabbed Peri by the upper arm, fingers biting into her flesh. 'And as for you –

you're lucky the Commandant is one of the old school, or I'd have made your last night one to remember.'

Peri stood motionless, ignoring the pain. 'Why don't you just obey your orders – *exactly*, Lieutenant?' Her eyes met his.

'I could have killed you back in the Commandant's office. I still could.'

She drew back her arm, hand flattened, edge level with his throat.

Hastily Hakon released her and stepped back.

'All right, get inside, all of you. Don't get any ideas. There'll be armed guards outside the door all night, and more guards patrolling the perimeter.' He stood back as they filed inside. 'I'll see you all in the morning – briefly. I'll be commanding the firing squad.'

'Don't shoot yourself in the foot,' said Peri. 'And don't forget our supper.'

The door slammed behind them.

Some hours later, Peri, Kyrin and Gina were sitting around the walls of an empty store-room munching glumly at the contents of standard-issue field ration packs. The packs held a variety of nutrient cubes that

felt, and tasted, like plastic.

‘Where’s the smoked *zargil* and the *akkeen*?’ grumbled Kyrin.

‘We did better feeding ourselves.’

‘You can thank the Commandant we’re even getting this muck,’ said Peri. ‘That Lieutenant would have spent the hours between now and dawn beating the shit out of us – that, and worse.’

She glanced at Gina. She was still shaking, although she’d recovered enough to suck on the tube of a flask of self-heating soup. Gina had been a schoolteacher and she’d led a sheltered life – until she’d run into a group of enemy soldiers on their way back to barracks after a night out.

‘I suppose we’d better make the best of it,’ said Kyrin.

‘Those poor buggers out there will be eating it for months, maybe years.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Peri. ‘You heard the Commandant. We’re the last guerrilla group. Now we’re all gone they’ll be able to pacify the planet.’

Surprisingly, Gina spoke. ‘They’ll turn it over to factory farming to feed their armies. It’ll ruin the ecology.’

Sylvana was an incredibly fertile planet, with rich soil, lush vegetation and a climate range from temperate to tropical. You could grow anything there – in vast quantities, if you were ruthless enough. In time the planet would become drained, burnt out. Not that that would worry the enemy, thought Peri. They’d just conquer another planet and start again.

‘Right now the ecology is the least of my worries,’ said Kyrin. He’d been a farmer once, until the invasion forces had rolled across his land.

‘What you reckon, boss? Any chance we’ll get out of this?’

He looked hopefully at Peri, convinced she could perform miracles.

Peri nodded towards the door. ‘Armed guards out there.’ She tapped the plastisteel wall she was leaning against. ‘We’d never get through here without explosives or power tools. And even if we did, there are

the perimeter guards.'

'What about the morning?'

Peri shrugged. 'We'll be under heavy armed guard again – all the way to the firing squad.'

'Should have had a go in the cave,' grumbled Kyrin. 'Taken a few with us.'

'If we'd had a go, we'd be dead now,' said Peri. 'Like Marko and Brand – and Lon. They didn't take anyone with them.'

'So? What do we gain by hanging it out?'

'A few more hours of life. As a friend of mine used to say, never give up till you're dead. There's always hope.'

'Yeah?' said Kyrin sceptically. 'What are we supposed to hope for? A miracle?'

'Why not?'

It was then they heard the low roar in the distance, and the plastisteel walls started to vibrate.

The roar grew louder.

'Retro-rockets,' said Kyrin. 'It's a battle fleet, a big one, somewhere close.'

Peri nodded. 'Maybe we've got our miracle after all.'

They jumped to their feet and stood listening. Other, closer sounds blended with the roar of the rocket motors. They heard the howl of alarm sirens, the sound of pounding feet, shouted orders and cries of alarm.

Then came the solid crump of laser-cannon, shaking the whole room.

'We've got to get out of here,' said Kyrin. 'One of those laser-blasts hits too close, and we'll be taken out by friendly fire.'

He began pounding on the store-room door. 'Hey, you out there, let us out! We could all get killed in here!'

'No use,' said Peri. 'I doubt if they're worrying about our health much

right now.'

To her astonishment the store-room door suddenly slid open.

Lieutenant Hakon stood in the corridor, wild-eyed and trembling. There was a blaster in his hand, two guards with laser-rifles behind him

'What's happening?' demanded Peri.

'We're under attack,' said Hakon, an edge of panic in his voice. 'The base is being evacuated. It won't be possible to carry out your execution as planned.'

'You mean it's postponed?' asked Kyrin hopefully.

'No,' said Hakon. 'Brought forward.' He stepped aside and turned to the two guards. 'Don't just stand there – shoot them.'

Shoot them all down!

Chapter Three

Escape

'Wait!' shouted Peri. There was so much authority in her voice that the two guards actually waited. 'Have you got the Commandant's authority to do this?'

Hakon shook his head. 'This is a piece of personal initiative on my part.' He glared at the guards. 'Now, shoot them. That's a direct order.'

'Don't do it,' snapped Peri. 'He's giving you an unlawful command. If you obey, you'll be committing a war crime. When the other side take over, you'll be executed yourselves.'

The guards hesitated.

'Shoot them!' screamed Hakon. 'Or must I do it myself?'

He raised his blaster – just as Peri spun sideways on her right foot, bringing her left leg round in a scything sweep that took his feet from under him.

As he crashed to the ground, Peri and Kyrin leapt over his body and sprang tiger-like on the two confused guards.

One fell as Kyrin's fist smashed him under the jaw. Peri dropped the other with a chopping blow to the neck with the edge of her hand.

It happened so fast that, as the two soldiers fell, Hakon was still scrambling onto his hands and knees. He fired wildly from the ground and Gina fell.

Furiously, Peri hurled herself at him, landing with both knees on the small of his back, flattening him to the ground and slamming his head against the floor with savage force. He went limp, unconscious or dead. She snatched the blaster from his hand and jumped up.

She went over to Gina and knelt to examine the body.

'She's dead – I think her heart stopped.'

Kyrin said, 'She was never very strong.'

He lifted the slight body and laid it gently to the ground in a corner of the store-room.

Peri reminded herself that there was no time to mourn. 'Get the guards' rifles and put the bodies into the store-room.'

Between them they bundled the three bodies into the storeroom. Peri touched the door-control and the door slid shut.

'Now what?' asked Kyrin.

'We get out,' said Peri. 'Get out and make contact with the other side.' She looked down the corridor. 'We'll go this way and try to find a perimeter exit.'

'We'll never make it. The place is full of enemy troops.'

'Full of *retreating* enemy troops,' corrected Peri. 'They'll be too busy saving their own skins to worry about us.'

Peri was right. The endless grey corridors were filled with soldiers carrying boxes and crates and files and weapons. Acrid smoke drifted along the corridors. Somewhere, somebody was burning secret files, thought Peri.

They passed a big open storage area with lines of soldiers grabbing crates from the shelves and scurrying away with them.

'Dump that rifle and grab a crate,' ordered Peri. 'Anything.'

We'll go with the others.' She tucked Hakon's blaster into the inside pocket of her safari jacket.

They snatched up crates at random and joined the procession, following the curve of the perimeter corridor until they reached an exit gate.

A harassed-looking middle-aged officer commanded a guard detail at the gate.

He looked at them in astonishment. 'Who the hell are you two?'

Kyrin shifted his crate to the other shoulder. 'Local civilian staff, sir. We was ordered to help with the evacuation.'

The officer rubbed his forehead. 'Didn't know we had any civilian staff.'

'We don't want to be here,' whined Peri. 'We were drafted in from the city. Something about freeing more troops for combat duty. When can we go home? We could get ourselves killed here.'

Non-combatants we are, we're not supposed to have to work under fire.'

'This is an emergency,' said the officer sternly. 'Every one must lend a hand. Get that stuff over to the shuttlecraft then come back for another load.'

He waved them on.

They went down the short exit-tunnel and emerged into a mini-spaceport, a floodlit open space. It held half a dozen shuttle-craft with loading ramps down. Long lines of soldiers carried supplies up the ramps. There were no soldiers coming out again. The shuttle-craft, Peri knew, were designed to rendezvous with a mother-ship somewhere in space. The enemy was in full retreat, evacuating men and supplies.

'Where now?' asked Kyrin.

'Not onto one of those shuttle-craft,' said Peri. She considered for a moment. 'Head for the most distant and we'll make for the perimeter fence.'

The invisible energy blast of a laser-cannon rocked the base behind

them and a section of the dome cracked like a shattered egg. ‘Softening-up fire,’ said Kyrin. ‘Letting them know they’re serious before they move in.’

Another blast toppled one of the nearer shuttle-craft, crushing screaming soldiers beneath it.

Terrified, the surviving troops fled for cover.

‘Like somebody kicked over an ants’ nest,’ said Kyrin with grim satisfaction.

‘Come on,’ shouted Peri. ‘This is our chance!’

Dropping their burdens, they ran for the fence.

They almost made it.

Just as they reached the plastisteel wire barrier, a voice behind them screamed, ‘Halt!’

They turned and saw Lieutenant Hakon behind them, clutching a laser-rifle. There was a vivid bruise across his forehead and he looked quite mad.

‘Where did you spring from?’ asked Peri.

‘Someone came along and let me out. I picked you up right away, I’ve been following you across the base.’

Peri could feel the weight of the hand-blaster – Hakon’s own blaster – in the inside pocket of her tunic. It wasn’t well placed for a fast draw – and Hakon was already covering them with the laser-rifle. If she could distract him somehow... She had to keep him talking.

‘Why didn’t you have us arrested?’

‘I wanted us to meet somewhere quiet, somewhere with nobody to interfere. We’ve still got unfinished business. You first, little man.’

Almost casually he shot Kyrin dead, watching with a smile as he staggered back and fell. He swung the rifle on to Peri.

‘And now for the *pièce de résistance*!’ He smiled. ‘I have been looking forward to this!’

He paused, savouring the moment.

Peri tensed, poised to go for the blaster. She had no chance of course. Hakon's thumb was already on the firing-stud and he would shoot her as soon as she moved.

She needed another miracle.

The miracle came.

A bright light shone from the sky, illuminating the entire spaceport.

A booming voice said, 'Your attention, please.'

As Hakon's head swung round, Peri snatched out the blaster and shot him down. Ignoring his crumpled body, she knelt beside Kyrin and closed his eyes.

'Bad luck, Kyrin, you almost made it.'

She straightened up, the blaster still in her hand. She looked at it for a moment and tossed it down beside Hakon's body. She was sick of killing.

Oblivious to the little drama below, the voice from the sky repeated, 'Your attention, please. Your base is ringed with Alliance battlecruisers, armed with laser-cannon. We can annihilate this base and its spaceport and everyone on it. You are being given one, and one only, opportunity for unconditional surrender... Will the senior officer please transmit his reply? You have five minutes...'

Peri remembered her thought at the hovertrain ambush – or was it a premonition? Very soon, she'd thought, they would all be dead.

And now they were – all except her.

Brand, Lon, Marko, Gina and finally Kyrin.

She'd led her devoted little band to their deaths.

She wondered what would happen to her now, and realised that she was too tired to care.

She turned and began walking back towards the dome.

Chapter Four

Surrender

The return to the dome was very different from her hazardous departure. This time the long grey corridors were empty, the attempt at evacuation abandoned. Presumably the soldiers had returned to their barracks to await an orderly surrender.

She passed abandoned offices and open store-rooms.

Supplies and files and computer disks were scattered everywhere.

Suddenly she realised that, for no particular reason, her feet were taking her back towards the Commandant's office. It was, thought Peri, as good a place as any to find out what was going on. Presumably her status had changed now that the Alliance had taken over. Besides, the Commandant was too decent a man to take a last-minute, petty revenge. Though it might be better not to mention killing Hakon...

As she neared the office, she heard voices. She saw that the door was ajar, moved quietly up to it and looked inside.

Some sort of ceremony was taking place.

The Commandant sat behind his desk. Behind him stood two grey-uniformed senior officers.

In front of the desk, their backs to Peri, stood two others, presumably officers of the Alliance

Both were more or less humanoid, neither was human.

One was short and squat, with a dome-shaped head. The head was set on a short, thick neck.

The other alien was tall and elegant with an elongated skull.

The short alien wore battered space armour, the taller one elaborate high-collared robes.

They were flanked by guards, massive ape-like figures with long straggling hair. They wore leather jerkins and carried blasters the size of cannons.

Peri noticed that despite their different uniforms, all three wore identical shoulder-flashes – a giant golden 'A', enclosed in some kind of laurel wreath.

Three different alien races, all in the same army, thought Peri

incredulously. She'd heard that the forces of the Alliance were mixed, but this was extraordinary.

The tall, elegant alien was speaking. 'I am High Commander Aril, leader of the Draconian contingent of the Alliance forces.

This is my colleague, Battle-Major Streg, of the Sontaran Troop.'

'A Draconian and a Sontaran in the same army,' said the Commandant, echoing Peri's thought. 'Guarded by Ogron sentries. Extraordinary!'

Ignoring the remark, the tall alien produced an elaborate scroll.

'This is the Instrument of Surrender.'

The Commandant studied the scroll. He nodded, grim-faced, and signed it with an old-fashioned pen. He passed the pen to one of his officers, who signed and passed it to the other, who signed as well.

The Commandant rose and handed the document to the Draconian officer.

The Draconian took the document, studied it for a moment and then passed it to the Sontaran. Both came to attention, as did the Ogron guards.

'Your surrender to the forces of the Alliance is accepted in the name of the Supremo,' said the Draconian gravely. 'You and your men are now prisoners of war. You will be honourably treated according to the Intergalactic Convention. If your government agrees to withdraw from the current conflict, you will all be allowed to return to your home planet.'

The Commandant looked surprised. 'That is a very generous offer.'

'The Supremo is merciful – where mercy is deserved.'

The harsh voice of the Sontaran took over. 'However, I must warn you that any violation of parole, any attempt at renewed resistance, will be ruthlessly put down.'

Good cop, bad cop, thought Peri.

'Meanwhile, we will accept the parole of such officers as wish to render it,' said the Draconian.

The Commandant rose and saluted. His officers saluted. The Alliance officers returned the salute.

The Commandant and his officers moved around to the front of the desk, and the Alliance officers took their place behind it. The Draconian, evidently the senior, took the chair, and the Sontaran stood at his right shoulder.

Power had been transferred.

All very civilised, thought Peri. You'd never think the Commander had been prepared to shoot her not long ago, or that the Alliance officers had threatened to wipe out the base and everyone inside.

Soldiers were weird.

Peri could see the aliens' faces now. She studied the round, rough-skinned features of the Sontaran, the burning red eyes under bristling brows, the snout of a nose and the almost lipless mouth.

They made a strange contrast to the long, elegant face of the Draconian with its slanting green eyes.

Commandant Nadir sighed, looking suddenly weary

'If that is all, High Commander, I will return to the barracks and look after my men.'

The Draconian looked sharply at him. 'You give your parole?'

'I do, and so do my staff officers.'

The Commandant looked to his officers for conformation.

They came to attention and chorused. 'We give parole.'

'Very well. You may go, gentlemen.'

As the little group started to move, the Sontaran held out a spade-like four-fingered hand to stop them. 'Wait!' He turned to the Draconian. 'With respect, High Commander, there is the Enquiry.'

'Yes indeed, the Enquiry. Continue, Battle-Commander.'

The Sontaran's burning red eyes swept over the little group of captured officers.

‘We are anxious to trace a missing human, originally from the planet Earth, recently reported by our Intelligence Section to be leading a group of guerrillas on this planet. If you have any information...’

The Commandant frowned. ‘My men captured a group of guerrillas last night. Their leader claimed to be from old Earth.’

The Sontaran leant forward. ‘Where are these guerrillas now?’

‘They escaped when you attacked our base. Some of them were killed in the process. I’ve no idea what happened to the survivors, if any. They’re probably all dead by now.’

The Sontaran’s thin lips drew back in a snarl, revealing jagged yellow fangs.

‘I advise you to find out what happened without delay, Commander. If you have killed the one we seek, it will go hard with you. The Supremo wants this person found. His orders are not lightly disobeyed.’

‘When I captured the guerrillas I had no knowledge of your interest in them, or their leader,’ said Commandant Nadir. ‘It was my duty to find them and destroy them. If you’d arrived a few hours later, they’d all have been executed.’

‘You will oblige me by making immediate enquiries,’ said the Sontaran.

‘Very well. What is the name of this human you seek?’ The Sontaran consulted a bulky wrist-com unit.

‘Per – pug – illiam,’ he said, stumbling over the unfamiliar syllables. ‘Perpugilliam Brown.’

The Draconian shuddered. ‘Such a cacophony of dissonant syllables. Human nomenclature is indeed strange and barbaric.’

The Commandant shrugged. ‘Perpugilliam Brown?’ he repeated. ‘The name means nothing to me.’ Followed by his staff officers, he turned towards the door. ‘I’ll see what I can find out about the fate of those guerrillas.’

The Sontaran glanced again at the wrist-com. ‘There is a further note. The name is often shortened to “Peri”.’

The Commandant swung round. ‘Peri? That was the name of the leader of the guerrillas.’

Peri pushed open the door and came into the room.

‘Somebody mention my name?’

Chapter Five

Reunion

It was, thought Peri, quite an entrance.

The Sontaran and the Draconian stared at her in utter amazement.

The Commandant and his officers stared too.

With grunts of surprise, the Ogron guards raised their blasters, covering her.

Ignoring them, Peri went and stood before the desk, where she had stood with her two companions before. It seemed a very long time ago.

‘What are you doing here?’ demanded the Draconian. ‘Who are you?’

‘Perpugilliam Brown – Peri. The one your Supremo apparently wants found.’

‘Nonsense,’ snapped the Sontaran. He swung round on the Draconian. ‘This cannot be the one we seek.’

‘Indeed? Why not?’

‘This specimen is a human female. The hair is finer, the thorax of a different construction –’

‘So?’ interrupted the Draconian. ‘You merely assume that the person we seek is male. It is impossible to tell from the barbarous human name.’

‘The Peri we seek is a famous guerrilla leader. No female –’

The Draconian sighed. ‘I admit it could not happen on Draconia. Nor, since your species has no females, could it occur on Sontara. But the customs of the humans are as mystifying as their names, and it is quite possible –’

Peri interrupted the wrangle. 'I tell you I'm Perpuilliam Brown.' She nodded towards the Commandant. 'Ask him!'

'Well?' asked the Draconian. 'Can you confirm this claim?'

The Commandant shrugged. 'I know only that the leader of the guerrilla band was called Peri – and the two other captured guerrillas acknowledged this one as their leader.'

'Let them be found and interrogated,' said the Sontaran.

'They're both dead.' said Peri briefly. 'Why does this Supremo of yours want to see me anyway?'

The Sontaran looked shocked. 'We do not question his orders, we obey them.' He gave the Draconian a baffled look.

'What must we do, High Commander Aril?'

The Draconian rose gracefully. 'I shall take the human female to the Supremo, Battle-Major Streg. He will decide. You will remain and see to the securing of the base.' He turned to Peri and said diffidently, 'There are signs of bruising on your auricular appendage. Somebody struck you?'

'Just a clip round the ear, nothing serious.'

'It appears that you are of some concern to the Supremo. If you have been mistreated, he will be displeased.' He pointed a long finger at the Commandant. 'Was this man responsible? Do you wish him executed?'

'No, he treated me pretty well. He was going to shoot me, mind you, but only in the line of duty. Lieutenant Hakon, one of his officers, did the damage.'

The Draconian nodded to the Sontaran. 'Find this Lieutenant Hakon and shoot him.'

'Immediately, High Commander.'

'No need,' said Peri. 'I attended to the matter myself.'

'Very well. If you will be kind enough to accompany me, Lady Peri? Arrange transport, Battle-Major. Staff-shuttle, Priority One.'

Leaving Streg barking orders into his wrist-com, he ushered Peri from the room.

Outside the main entrance, a gleaming, silver sphere awaited them, its side emblazoned with a giant golden 'A'. Ogron sentries saluted as the Draconian escorted Peri up the ramp.

She was shown into a luxuriously furnished circular cabin, with one long window running around it.

'Please be seated, Lady Peri,' said the Draconian, and Peri sank gratefully into the cushioned bench beneath the windows.

He bowed. 'Allow me to introduce myself. I am High Commander Aril of the Alliance Battle Fleet. You permit me to be seated?'

Peri nodded and he sank gracefully down beside her.

The spacecraft took off, so smoothly that it was scarcely noticeable.

'May I offer you refreshment?'

He touched a hidden control and a uniformed steward appeared with a silver tray. He pulled a table from the wall between Peri and Aril, placed the tray upon it, bowed and disappeared.

The tray held a decanter, crystal goblets and a variety of snacks – biscuits, pastries, preserved meats and fishes, cheeses and other things Peri didn't recognise.

Aril poured wine for them both. It was cool and white, faintly lemony. Peri drained her glass, realising she was both thirsty and starving.

She surveyed the tray and Aril offered her a platter of what looked like crystallised grasshoppers.

'Try these, my lady. A delicacy from my own planet.'

'Later perhaps. I think I'll start with a biscuit and some of that cheese.'

Aril served her and helped himself to a platter of grasshoppers.

Peri ate and drank, trying not to look too greedy. When she'd finished, she leant wearily against the cushions.

It had been a long and eventful night, and the constant sudden changes in her status – guerrilla, condemned prisoner and now, it seemed, some kind of VIP – had left her tired and confused.

She looked out of the window and saw the darkened countryside

below her. Here and there was the glow of burning buildings and the flash of laser-cannon.

‘The planet will soon be in our hands,’ said Aril.

‘You’re very confident.’

‘The Supremo himself drew up the assault plans. He does not fail. More wine, my lady?’ He refilled her goblet.

‘What’s all this my lady stuff?’ said Peri. ‘Why am I suddenly so important?’

Aril looked surprised. ‘It appears that you are of great concern to the Supremo, my lady. He has made constant efforts to find you. Anything that concerns our great leader is of supreme importance to us all.’

He must be some leader, thought Peri sleepily. Someone who could weld Draconians, Sontarans and Ogrons into a fighting force and ruthlessly recapture an occupied planet in a single night. Someone so impressive that a senior Draconian officer hurried to fulfil his every whim, so powerful that the merest hint of his interest invested her with a kind of nobility.

A vision formed in her mind of a military giant, a tall, square-jawed superman, with bristling brows and an impressive military moustache.

She drifted into sleep...

Peri awoke from a nightmare in which she kept killing Lieutenant Hakon and he refused to die to find High Commander Aril deferentially tapping her shoulder.

‘We have arrived, my lady.’

Peri yawned and stretched and rubbed her eyes. She looked out of the window and gasped. They were approaching the biggest spaceship she had ever seen, a towering castle of steel bristling with weaponry and signal antennae.

‘The flagship of the Alliance Battle Fleet,’ said Aril proudly.

‘It is the Supremo’s personal transport.’

‘It’s a nice little runabout,’ said Peri, and Aril looked at her in blank incomprehension.

The little spacecraft headed straight for the huge gleaming tower. A docking slot opened and they slid smoothly inside.

They left the spacecraft for an enormous hangar where technicians scurried to and fro, rose endlessly in a lift, and emerged into a broad carpeted corridor that might have been part of some luxury hotel. A handsome young officer in a white and gold dress uniform was waiting to greet them. He came to attention and saluted – it was the flat hand, palm-outward army salute Peri remembered from Earth.

Aril returned the salute. ‘This is Ensign Vidal, one of the Supremo’s aides. I leave you in his capable hands. I must return to my duties.’

Peri realised she was going to miss Aril.

She hadn’t, she realised, encountered much kindness recently. Maybe that’s why she felt some kind of bond with Aril.

‘Thank you for everything,’ she said. ‘You’ve been very kind.’

Aril bowed formally. ‘My life at your command.’ He turned and strode away.

Peri looked at Ensign Vidal. ‘All right, then. Take me to your leader.’

Ensign Vidal looked shocked. ‘The Supremo is presently in conference. He will see you when he is at liberty.’

‘When will that be?’

‘When the Supremo decides. Probably not for some while.’

He looked at her disapprovingly. ‘No doubt you would like to use the time available to make yourself more presentable.’

It was some time since Peri had given much thought to her appearance, and she suddenly realised how she must look. Thin

– or at least thinner than she had been – brown-skinned, and grimy. Arms and legs scarred with snake and insect bites.

Clothes, bush shirt, safari jacket and shorts, all tattered and worn. Hair, a tangled mop.

‘Guerrilla chic,’ she thought wryly. ‘Perhaps the look will catch on.’

She stared resentfully at the immaculate young officer. ‘I’m afraid

these are all the clothes I have. Jungle warfare doesn't leave much time for fashion. A bath might help. I clean up quite nicely.'

'Of course. If you will follow me?'

He led her along the corridor, turned off into a smaller one and opened a door to reveal a magnificently furnished sitting room. Silk drapes, thick carpets, deep soft chairs and ornamental tables gave it an air of oriental luxury. An open door revealed a bedroom with canopied bed, furnished in a similarly opulent style.

'This is the Supremo's guest suite,' said Vidal. He led her to the door of the bedroom, indicating a further door beyond.

'There is a bathroom and all the usual conveniences,' he said, blushing a little. 'The wardrobes and dressing-tables contain a selection of garments.'

'Very efficient,' said Peri. 'Does your Supremo often entertain female guests?'

Vidal gave her a shocked look and ignored the question.

'Drinks and other refreshments are available in the bedside cabinet,' he said stiffly. 'I will return to fetch you in due course.'

He bowed and left.

Peri went into the bathroom where a wall-length mirror confirmed her worst fears. Fiddling with unfamiliar controls, she managed to fill the bath with warm, scented water and enjoyed a long luxurious soak. Wrapped in a long silk robe, she explored the bedroom and found that it held a selection of clothes in every imaginable style.

The Supremo, she thought, had things very well organised.

When Ensign Vidal returned he found Peri stretched out on a divan, sipping a glass of green Arcturan wine. She wore a white silk gown with matching bolero jacket, and her hair was brushed smoothly back, secured in a chignon with a black velvet ribbon.

Ensign Vidal surveyed her with approval. 'Better. Much better. Now, come with me.'

It occurred to Peri that he showed none of the reverence accorded her by High Commander Aril. But then, as the Supremo's aide, he was

close to the source of ultimate power.

As he led her along luxuriously carpeted corridors, Vidal said, 'The Supremo's conference is over-running a little, but we hope that it will soon draw to an end. Then he will see you.'

Feeling suddenly stropky, Peri came to a halt. 'Look, if the conference isn't over yet, why don't I wait in comfort in the guest suite? Then you can fetch me when the Supremo's free?'

Ensign Vidal stopped as well, looking at her in blank incomprehension.

'But then the Supremo would have to wait!'

Which was clearly unthinkable.

Vidal continued along the corridor. Mutinously, Peri followed. He led her, by a circuitous route, to a small door at the end of a narrow corridor. The door was guarded by two Ogron sentries armed with the usual massive blaster-rifles. At the sight of Ensign Vidal they came clumsily to attention, making a rudimentary attempt at presenting arms.

Vidal looked at them and sighed. The door opened and he ushered Peri into a brightly lit dressing-room.

'Why the Supremo insists on using those clumsy apes when every sentient life form in the galaxy would be proud to serve in his personal bodyguard –' muttered Vidal. He broke off, realising perhaps, thought Peri, that he had come perilously close to criticising the Supremo.

He indicated a small open door on the far side of the little room. Putting his lips to her ear he whispered, 'We are at the rear of the conference chamber. Look through that door and you will see him!'

Peri went over to the door and looked out. It was like being backstage in the biggest theatre in the world.

She was standing directly behind a lean, medium-sized, black-uniformed figure on a raised podium. (So much for her military giant, thought Peri.) The uniform was both simple and ornate with gold epaulettes and gold braid at collar and cuffs.

Beyond was an enormous circular chamber, about the size of a

baseball stadium. Row upon row of tiered seats rose into the distance. The seats were occupied by an amazingly diverse crowd of uniformed officers. Every sentient species in the galaxy seemed to be represented. Draconians, Sontarans and Ogrons, like the ones she'd already met, predominated, but there were many other species Peri was unable to identify, together with an amazing variety of humans and humanoids.

The whole extraordinary assembly was dominated by the black-clad figure of the Supremo. He was speaking in a voice Peri found at once familiar and strange.

It was a quiet, calm voice, yet it crackled with authority.

Every word, every syllable was icily distinct. The vast, interspecies audience listened in utter silence.

'So, to conclude,' said the Supremo. 'The next stage of our plan is complete. The planet of Sylvana has been wrested from the enemy's grasp.'

A cheer erupted from the audience.

The Supremo held up his hand, and absolute silence fell once more.

'Do not be too quick to congratulate yourselves. Parts of the operation ran smoothly. Others were little more than a total shambles, succeeding only because the enemy exceeded us in inefficiency. We were lucky. We cannot depend on luck.' He paused. 'The problem, as always, lies in faulty inter-species cooperation and communication. Let me remind you, I hope for the last time, that you are no longer Draconians, Sontarans, Cybermen or anything else. Until this conflict is concluded, and the enemy finally defeated, you are all soldiers of the Alliance.

After that, you can return to cutting each other's throats with my good will.' With terrifying suddenness, his voice rose to an angry shout. 'By the beard of Rassilon! If you cannot do better than this, I'll pack you all off home and defeat the enemy with an army of Ogrons. They, at least, know how to obey orders.'

A stunned silence fell. Peri saw a group of Ogrons in the front row beaming and slapping each other on the back.

She turned to Vidal who was standing close behind her. 'Not entering any popularity contests, is he?'

‘Don’t you believe it,’ whispered Vidal. ‘The more he abuses them, the more they love him. That was the stick. Now comes the carrot.’

‘However, gentlemen,’ said the Supremo. ‘Despite your occasional failings – and because of your courage, hard work and military skill – victory is ours! I congratulate you – and I thank you.’

There was another moment of silence as the audience took in what he had said. Then they came to their feet with a roar of

‘Supremo! Supremo! Supremo!’ that shook the hall.

The Supremo nodded briefly, then turned and strode from the podium.

Vidal ran to a closet, emerging with a silken robe.

Peri stepped back as the Supremo marched into the dressing room, ripping open the high collar of his jacket. It had, Peri could see now, a gold ‘S’ embroidered over the heart. He stopped dead at the sight of Peri.

Vidal came forward with the robe. The Supremo took it from him and waved him towards the door.

Vidal bowed and retreated.

Peri stared in fascination at the man before her, so familiar and yet so utterly different. In the harsh glare of the dressing-room lighting, the body was stiff and erect, the face harsh and closed. The fair hair was clipped short, the skin seemed darker, the eyes were burning with energy.

‘Hello, Peri,’ said the Supremo. ‘Nice to see you again.’

‘Hello, Doctor,’ said Perpugilliam Brown.

Book II

Hospice

One standard galactic year earlier

Chapter One

R&R

‘Just a bit of peace and quiet, Doctor,’ pleaded Peri. ‘Fresh air,

beautiful scenery, unspoiled nature. Surely there must be at least one planet in the galaxy which isn't awash with murderous monsters or hostile intelligent life forms!

The Doctor took a sip of tea and smiled. 'Of course there are, Peri,' he said amiably. 'Of course, you have to pick your era.'

A time when the savage dinosaur-type creatures have died out and the one really dangerous species hasn't yet evolved.'

'What one really dangerous species?'

'Man, of course – or his equivalent!'

They were sitting in the Doctor's study in the TARDIS, a cosy, oak-panelled, book-lined room, recovering from their latest adventure. At least, Peri was still recovering. The Doctor, on the other hand, seemed completely at ease. He was sitting in a deep leather armchair by the coal fire that flickered perpetually in the old-fashioned grate. As usual, he looked immaculately Edwardian in striped trousers, fawn blazer and crisp white shirt, his fair hair brushed sleekly back. He was drinking tea and leafing through his beloved first edition of *The Time Machine*. He smiled as he read the scrawled inscription on the title page.

'To the Doctor with affection and respect – H.G.'

Peri, on the other hand, felt restless and jangled.

'It's all right for him,' she thought resentfully, looking at the Doctor's placid figure. 'He's used to risking his neck and saving the universe on a regular basis. He doesn't seem to realise other people have nerves.'

At which point she made her impassioned plea for peace and quiet and the joys of unspoiled nature.

'All I want is a bit of R & R,' she concluded.

The Doctor raised an interrogative eyebrow.

'Rest and Recreation,' explained Peri.

'Ah!' said the Doctor. 'An Americanism!'

He studied her for a moment.

She was wearing a simple white linen dress and her dark hair was

brushed neatly back. She looked, thought the Doctor dispassionately, quite beautiful. But some of her usual warmth and vitality was lacking, and there were lines of strain about her eyes and the corners of her mouth.

He finished his tea, laid down his book on a leather-topped occasional table, stood up and moved towards the door. 'Where are you off to?' demanded Peri.

'Control room – to set a course for a nice peaceful planet still unspoiled by civilization,' He paused. 'You might want to change into something more suitable.'

'Like what?'

'Safari suit, boots, a nice big hat. Basic explorer's gear.'

'Right,' said Peri happily, and followed him from the room.

She felt better already.

An hour later, subjective time, the Doctor and Peri stood outside the TARDIS, gazing at a landscape of spectacular beauty.

The TARDIS had landed on a mountain ledge and the scenery all around them was breathtaking. Behind rose a range of jagged mountain crags, their misty peaks tipped with snow.

Below the terrain fell away steeply, down to a jungle plateau.

A broad river flowed across it, fed by a mighty waterfall that thundered down the mountainside, its turbulent waters gleaming in the morning sunlight.

Peri looked at the Doctor, her face aglow with delight. 'You certainly delivered, Doctor. This place is terrific.'

'Not bad, is it,' said the Doctor modestly. 'Maybe I should set up a galactic tourist agency.'

Peri looked at the jungle below. 'And it's safe?'

'I don't think there's much down there that would harm you, not if you were careful. If I got my temporal co-ordinates right, we've arrived after the dinosaurs and before the sabre-toothed tigers.'

'Do the life forms on all planets evolve like those on Earth?'

‘Only very roughly, there are all kinds of variations. But you often find an age of huge, clumsy, armoured beasts, followed by a time of sharp-toothed predators. Then a variety of life forms, one of which evolves into the dominant intelligent species. Not always the apes, of course. The fish people of Aquaria, for instance...’

‘Maybe later, Doctor,’ said Peri, cutting short the impending lecture. Sometimes the Doctor had a tendency to tell you a lot more than you wanted to know. ‘Can we take a look around –

down there?’ She pointed. ‘There seems to be some kind of path.’

‘Why not? We could take something to eat and drink and have a picnic down by the river. Maybe even do a bit of fishing.

Old Isaac always said there was nothing like –’

Peri never heard the rest of what old Isaac used to say.

Death dropped down from the sky.

As the Doctor had said, evolution allows for many variations.

One of them was watching them from a rocky spur high above.

Its ancestors had been very much like pterodactyls. Its descendants would turn into something closely resembling Earth’s feathered birds.

The creature on the crag was still at an evolutionary stage somewhere in between, a hangover from the days of savage armoured beasts. Its vast, leathery wings were sparsely scattered with feathers. It glided more than flew, though it could achieve laborious upward motion by clumsily flapping its wings and using the upward thermals. Once in a suitably high place, it waited and watched. It had an oversized head on the end of a long, scrawny neck, a powerful beak lined with rows of razor-sharp teeth and huge, incredibly efficient eyes.

Its hunting method was simple. Once it had attained a suitably high vantage point, it would watch and wait. The big head on the long neck circled to and fro, the saucer-like eyes alert for any flicker of movement.

Once movement was detected, the huge eyes focused, magnifying the image, checking for size and strength and ability to resist attack. If the prey looked too dangerous, too powerful, it would be ignored. But if it was small and weak...

The sudden appearance of the blue box on the ledge had alarmed the watching beast. It crouched motionless, assessing the situation. But when the two creatures emerged, its interest was aroused. It studied their magnified images for a moment or two, chose its prey and struck.

‘– a spot of angling,’ said the Doctor.

With an unearthly shriek, a black shape dropped like a thunderbolt from the sky above, fastening its teeth into Peri’s upper arm. She felt no pain, just a kind of enormous, incredibly heavy blow. She went numb with shock, unable to resist.

Flapping its wings, the creature tried to lift her, but she was heavier than it had expected. The Doctor flung himself upon Peri’s attacker, gripping the scrawny neck with both hands and trying to wrench it away. The beast hung on doggedly, teeth sinking deeper into Peri’s arm.

Leaning forwards, the Doctor fastened his teeth into the creature’s neck, jaw muscles bulging as he clamped down hard.

With a shriek of rage and pain, the creature loosed Peri, who fell unconscious at the Doctor’s feet. Angrily the great head swung round to attack the Doctor. Sliding his hands up to the point where the head joined the neck, the Doctor tightened his grip and held the flapping beast at arm’s length.

Exerting a force that seemed incredible for his slender frame, he gripped tighter, tighter and then began to twist, wringing the creature’s neck. With a sudden grinding crack the long neck snapped and the beast went limp.

Hurling its body down the steep slope, the Doctor knelt by Peri. She was still unconscious, blood pulsing from a deep gash in the upper arm.

A gash so deep that the arm seemed almost severed.

The Doctor took a silk handkerchief from his pocket, twisted it into a rope and tied a cruelly tight tourniquet above the gaping wound. The bleeding slowed.

The Doctor bent to lift her, changed his mind and disappeared inside the TARDIS. He pulled open an emergency locker in the control room, took out a flat metal disc and dashed outside. Kneeling beside Peri, he

ripped away the torn safari jacket and clamped the disc just below the terrible wound. A thin rime of frost began spreading over Peri's arm, spreading until it covered her face and then the rest of the body. The Doctor picked up the frozen, corpse-like figure and carried it into the control room. Pulling a bunk from the control room wall he laid Peri's body down.

For a moment he gazed at her. She looked like a statue in ice. But she was safe – for the moment. The emergency cryogenic device would hold her body in stasis, the effect of the wound no worse, and no better, than it was at this exact moment. In time the effect would wear off. Before then, he must find Peri skilled medical care. The arm had been almost severed.

With the finest medical care in the cosmos it was by no means certain that Peri's arm – and indeed her life – could be saved.

The Doctor moved to the many-sided control console and considered. Fast action was vital – but clear thought even more so.

Where should he take her? He considered Gallifrey, despite the dangers and disadvantages for himself. The price of return would be high, but he would pay it unhesitatingly to save Peri.

But there was somewhere else – somewhere closer and better. A place where the savagery of war had raised surgery to its highest pitch of skill. The domain of the one man who could save Peri's arm and her life.

The Doctor realised that the decision had already been taken. His hands were moving over the controls.

The Castle stood on a mountaintop, dominating the bleak and rocky countryside all around. Winds howled, thunder roared and lightning flashed around its turrets and towers. Once it had been the home of a ruthless warlord. Now, the interior transformed, it was a citadel of medical science.

In the high-ceilinged, stone-flagged reception area, nurses, doctors and orderlies moved silently to and fro. Monitor screens glowed behind the circular reception desk in the centre of the hall. Suddenly the sacred silence was broken by an odd wheezing, groaning sound. A blue box materialised in a shadowed recess at the back of the hall, and a fair-haired man emerged. In his arms he carried the frozen body of a wounded girl, her right shoulder soaked with blood.

The Doctor stood looking around for a moment and saw a passing orderly with an empty hovertrolley.

‘Here, you!’ he ordered, with such authority that the orderly obeyed instantly. The Doctor laid Peri’s body carefully on the trolley. ‘Follow me!’ He strode over to the reception desk.

Obediently, the orderly followed.

Behind the desk, the receptionist ignored him.

The Doctor spoke again, that same whiplash of authority in his voice. ‘I must see the Surgeon-General, immediately.’

The receptionist, a thin, imperious-looking woman in a white robe, stared at him in outrage.

‘Impossible!’

‘Essential,’ said the Doctor. ‘Can’t you see this is an emergency?’ He pointed to the trolley. ‘This girl is gravely wounded, and I’m not sure how long the cryogenic stasis will hold. If she isn’t given immediate expert help, she’s going to die.’

Drawn by curiosity, a young intern came over and examined the body on the trolley.

‘I’m afraid you’re too late,’ he said gently. ‘The wound is too severe, the poor girl is beyond saving. Though perhaps if we amputate the arm...’

‘That is for your chief surgeon to say,’ said the Doctor obstinately. He turned back to the receptionist. ‘Fetch him at once, please, before it’s too late.’

‘I will do no such thing,’ said the outraged receptionist. ‘The Surgeon-General is far too busy to be troubled with stray vagrants.’

The Doctor was about to give an angry reply when he saw a black-robed figure sweeping across the hall. He turned and called, ‘Reverend Mother! I beseech your aid.’

The figure stopped and turned. The Doctor saw fierce black eyes above a gauzy black veil. An imperious old voice said, ‘Who calls on me?’

‘I call, Reverend Mother,’ said the Doctor humbly. ‘There is one here

who will die unless the chief surgeon helps her.'

A withered hand waved him away dismissively. 'I cannot interfere in hospital affairs.'

The Doctor lowered his voice. 'I beg you, Reverend Mother

– by the Pact of Rassilon and the Vision of the Eye.'

The fierce black eyes studied him. Then the Reverend Mother turned to the receptionist and said, 'Summon the chief surgeon.'

'With the greatest respect, Reverend Mother –'

'*Summon him.*' The authority in the old voice could not be denied.

The receptionist's hands flew over her controls. Leaning forward she spoke in hushed tones. 'My apologies for this disturbance, sir, there is an emergency in the reception hall.'

Reverend Mother Maren herself...'

'My humble thanks, Reverend Mother,' said the Doctor.

'You are fortunate,' said Maren dryly, 'I am seldom here.'

They waited for what seemed an endless time.

The Reverend Mother stood motionless. The Doctor went over to the trolley and looked anxiously down at Peri. Was the cryogenic stasis wearing off?

A medium-sized man in an elaborate white uniform came striding arrogantly into the hall. He marched over to the desk and glared indignantly at the Doctor.

'How dare you have me summoned like this? Don't you know who I am?'

'I very much hope you will tell me,' said the Doctor politely.

'I am Surgeon-General of the Hospice of Karn,' said the newcomer. 'My name is Mehendri Solon.'

Chapter Two

Lock-up

The Doctor bowed respectfully. 'It is a great honour to meet you, sir. All the galaxy acknowledges your genius. You are the only man alive who can help me.'

Mollified by the flattery, Solon spoke less harshly. 'Help you?

In what way?'

The Doctor indicated the hoversrolley. 'This young lady is my dear friend and companion. Only you can save her arm – and her life.'

Solon examined Peri's wound, and the Doctor examined Mehendri Solon.

The Solon he had known in another time – the Doctor's past and Solon's future – had been a very different man. Older, broken down by a series of disappointments and failures and completely mad.

This was another Solon, still relatively young, untouched by failure, a brilliantly successful man at the height of his powers.

But the seeds of that other Solon could be seen in his face and in his manner. The vanity, the arrogance verging on megalomania, the hint of underlying weakness in the mouth and chin.

The Doctor was well aware of the dangers of contacting someone whose timestream he was later to cross with such dramatic effect. But the risk – any risk – was worth taking to save Peri. The Doctor's simple plan was to get Peri healed and then quietly disappear. By the time the Solon of the future met the Doctor's previous incarnation, he would have completely forgotten the stranger and his wounded companion. Peri's would be just one more in a long string of successful operations. With any luck, the temporal interference involved would be minimal.

Solon finished his preliminary examination. 'There is a chance, just a chance, of saving the arm and the girl if I operate at once. But it will not be easy. The operation will be long and complicated, consuming many hours of my valuable time. Why should I give her priority when there are so many demands on me?' 'Because I'll wring your neck if you don't, you conceited little swine,' thought the Doctor. But he didn't say so. Instead he said humbly, 'Because you and you alone can achieve success – and thereby prove your greatness once again.'

Solon seemed to find the answer satisfactory. He turned to the orderly. 'Take the girl to surgery and have her prepared. I shall operate at

once.'

As the orderly took Peri away, the Doctor said, quite sincerely this time, 'I can't thank you enough. What are her chances of a full recovery?'

Solon frowned. 'Hard to say. There has been a delay – and if the saliva of the creature that attacked her was toxic, which is very probable, there's a grave danger of infection.' He shrugged.

'Say, 65 per cent.'

The Doctor couldn't help looking disappointed. 'So low?

Even in the hands of the greatest surgeon in the galaxy?'

Solon gave him an affronted glare. 'In anyone else's hands she would have no chance at all.'

He turned and followed the hoverslides.

The Doctor watched him go, wondering what to do next. He was tempted to go back inside the TARDIS and jump forward a week or two. But the Blinovitch Limitation Effect made such short temporal time hops very tricky. He might reappear months later, Peri would think he'd deserted her. No, he'd have to sit out the wait in subjective time. Should he wait in the TARDIS or seek some kind of accommodation?

Suddenly the decision was made for him.

Two hard-faced, black-uniformed men marched across the hall towards him, security written all over them.

'Come with us, please,' said the first of them.

The Doctor looked around for the Reverend Mother but she had disappeared.

'Come with you?' he asked mildly. 'Why?'

'You are under arrest.'

The Doctor was marched through endless stone corridors. From time to time he caught glimpses of the hi-tech medical equipment imposed on the ancient fabric of the castle. The ancient corridors were illuminated with modern glow-strips.

They passed brightly lit operating theatres, rooms filled with sophisticated monitoring equipment and long wards full of motionless, sheet-shrouded figures. It was hard to tell, thought the Doctor with a shudder, if they were hospital wards or morgues.

They descended several flights of stone steps; the hi-tech additions faded away and the atmosphere became solidly medieval. They ended up in a dark corridor illuminated by flaming torches set in wall-brackets. There were rows of metal-studded doors, each with its own small barred window set high in the door.

One of the cell doors was opened, the Doctor was shoved inside and the cell door clanged shut behind him.

He surveyed his surroundings. A wooden bunk with a thin straw mattress and an even thinner blanket. A small barred window in the far wall, giving a view, if you stood on the bunk, of sections of castle wall on either side, and sheer mountainside falling away below. Ahead, more mountain peaks.

Cell facilities, a stone jug of brackish water and a rusty metal bucket under the bunk.

‘Could be worse,’ thought the Doctor, remembering some of the places in which he’d been locked up. ‘This is probably one of the VIP suites. Perhaps I should publish a guide – *Cells and Dungeons I Have Known*.’

Security methods are much the same everywhere, and this was an all too familiar routine. The imprisonment without explanation or discussion, leaving the prisoner alone with his fears. The long hours of waiting, giving him plenty of time to worry about his fate. Perhaps a routine beating or two. Poor food, degrading conditions, abusive guards. It was all part of the softening-up process, designed to break the prisoner’s will before the interrogation began.

The Doctor wondered how things were going with Peri. Had the operation begun yet? Would it be a success? Had he done the right thing in bringing her here? Hoping desperately that Solon’s talents matched his conceit, the Doctor stretched out on the bunk. After a while he drifted into sleep.

At this very moment the Doctor was the cause of a clash between two of the most formidable personalities on Karn.

No one could deny that Commander Aylmer Hawken, Head of Security of the Hospice of Karn, looked the part. A massive figure,

well over two metres tall, he had a jutting jaw, permanently blue with stubble, and a bullet-shaped head covered with close-clipped black hair, now sprinkled with grey. His dark grey eyes were deep and penetrating under beetling brows, his wide mouth thin-lipped and severe.

Despite his always immaculate black and silver uniform, his long arms and big hands gave him an undeniably ape-like appearance. He looked, as one of his more daring subordinates said, like a well-tailored gorilla.

Despite his intimidating appearance Hawken was, in his own way, a civilised soul, well educated, cultivated, with a taste for the finer things in life. Though occasionally forced to use blackmail, torture and murder in the course of his work, Hawken did so with the greatest reluctance, and only as a last resort.

The very sight of Hawken intimidated most people, but his opponent in the current discussion showed no sign of being impressed.

The slight, wizened form in the flowing black robes was upright and erect, and the bright black eyes behind the flowing veil stared fearlessly up into his own.

Reverend Mother Maren of the Sisterhood of Karn was a power in her own right. The Sisterhood had been on Karn long before the Hospice, and its members were both feared and revered. Here on Karn, home of the Sisterhood, the Reverend Mother Maren was on her own territory, and it was Hawken who was on the defensive.

‘You locked him up,’ she was saying scornfully. ‘The security man’s answer to every problem. Lock it up and throw away the key!’ ‘But Reverend Mother, he had to be locked up,’ protested Hawken. ‘The Hospice is a military installation as well as a place of healing. We can’t have people casually bypassing one of the most sophisticated security systems in the galaxy with some unfathomable piece of equipment –’

‘The mere fact that he was able to do so should have warned you to handle him carefully. Do you know anything about him?’

His name, even?’

‘Not as yet, Reverend Mother, he has not been formally interrogated. He is undergoing the usual softening-up process...’

‘Softening up!’ snapped Maren. ‘You’re the one who’s softened up, Commander Hawken – in the head!’

‘But Reverend Mother –’

‘I am your Adviser, am I not?’

‘Of course, Reverend Mother. And a most valued –’

‘Then take my advice. See this intruder at once. Interrogate him by all means – but with care and courtesy.’

‘Very well, Reverend Mother,’ said Hawken. ‘And to aid me in my task –’ His voice hardened. ‘May I ask what you yourself know of this prisoner? I understand that the Surgeon-General was summoned to attend him at your intervention. So extreme a measure –’

‘Your spies are everywhere, Commander.’

‘Like yours, Reverend Mother.’

Maren paused. ‘At the moment I know little more than you,’

she said grudgingly. ‘But he spoke certain words to me – Words of Power known to only a few. So, Commander, treat him carefully – but hold him fast. He could be a valuable ally – or a danger to us both.’

‘I shall of course take your advice, Reverend Mother,’ said Hawken. He spoke into the com-unit on his desk. ‘Bring the new prisoner for interrogation immediately. And treat him gently.’ He looked up. ‘Reverend Mother, do you wish to be present yourself

–’ But Maren had gone.

‘Bloody woman,’ thought Hawken. ‘She knows more about this mysterious prisoner than she’s telling me. Now she wants me to do her dirty work for her!’

Annoyed and intrigued at the same time, he waited for his prisoner to arrive.

Chapter Three

Operation

Jail guard Altos threw open the cell door with a clang and yelled at the Doctor. ‘You! Up! Come! Now!’

Hawken's orders had been passed down to him – but as far as Altos was concerned, treating prisoners gently meant not actually hitting them.

The Doctor sat up, immediately wide awake.

'Is there any news?' he asked.

'News?'

'The girl I brought here, the one with the wounded arm. Is the operation over?'

Altos neither knew nor cared. 'Prisoners don't ask questions, they answer them. On your feet. Move!'

The Doctor looked at the guard with disfavour. 'You know, you remind me of Hobbes's description of the life of man –

nasty, brutish and short.'

Realising that he was being insulted, Altos reached automatically for his electroclub. Then he remembered the special instructions and stopped himself.

'Move yourself, prisoner,' he screamed. 'The Commander wants to see you.'

The Doctor rose to his feet, glanced up at the little window and saw only pitch darkness. The small hours of the morning, he reflected, the hour when vitality was at its lowest ebb. The traditional time for interrogation. He followed the guard out of the cell. He wondered how things were going with Peri. Perhaps this Commander would have news...

Arms bloody to the elbow, Surgeon-General Mehendri Solon stepped back from the operating table and surveyed his work with satisfaction.

Beside him, Assistant-Surgeon Drago whispered, 'Brilliant.

Sheer genius!'

Soberly, Solon nodded his agreement. He usually chose Drago for his assistant. Far from the most skilled of the junior surgeons, he was the one with the attitude Solon considered most suitable – grovelling adoration.

Solon turned aside, peeled off his long surgical gloves and held his hands under a faucet. Warm, scented water flowed into a basin and he washed his hands and arms. He turned, holding them out before him, and a theatre nurse dried them reverently with a towel.

Solon returned to the operating table and surveyed his unconscious patient. She lay white-skinned and motionless, scarcely seeming to breathe.

‘Reconnecting or replacing the severed muscles and tendons was simple enough,’ said Solon. ‘Cobbler’s work. But restoring the nerves to full function – that does call for a certain delicacy of touch.’

Peri’s naked body was surrounded by and connected to banks of complex electronic equipment. The re-attached right arm looked completely normal again, without even a trace of a scar. When the surgery was complete, the terrible wound had been carefully repaired with bio-flesh, then sprayed with bioskin, living substances that would become part of her body. Unless, as sometimes happened, the body rejected them...

Solon touched a control, and the re-attached right arm rose from Peri’s side, flexed and then lowered itself.

Solon nodded. ‘Satisfactory – so far.’

‘What are her chances of a full recovery?’ asked Drago.

Solon shrugged. ‘Reasonable. Unless the body rejects the new tissue, in which case she’ll probably die.’

‘I’m sure that won’t happen,’ said Drago. ‘Like all your operations, Surgeon-General, this one will be a brilliant success.’

‘The operation is a brilliant success,’ said Solon coldly. ‘The life or death of the patient is largely irrelevant.’ He glanced down at Peri. ‘All the same, it will be a pity if she dies. She is not unattractive. If she recovers, I may give her an opportunity to show her gratitude.’

‘I am sure she would be honoured, Surgeon-General,’ said Drago. He hesitated. ‘Though...’

‘Well?’

‘Perhaps the man who brought her here might not be too pleased.’

‘He is currently being interrogated by Commander Hawken,’

said Solon carelessly. ‘He may not survive it, not everyone does.

And if Hawken fails, he’ll hand him over to us for a more scientific approach. In which case – well, accidents will happen.’

Dismissing the subject, he continued, ‘What time is my next operation scheduled?’

‘In four hours, Surgeon-General.’

Solon nodded and shrugged out of his operating gown, well aware that there would be a nurse there to catch it. ‘I shall rest for a while. Send the patient to Recuperation. Give her a private room.’

As he strode towards his luxurious quarters, Solon became aware that he wasn’t tired. As so often happened after a successful operation, his whole being was awash with adrenaline.

He was intoxicated with his own brilliance.

Changing course, he headed for a certain narrow cul-de-sac, ending, apparently, in a blank wall. Solon produced an electronic disc about the size of a coin and pressed it to a minute depression in the rock wall.

A concealed door slid open in the rock wall. Solon went through it and the door closed behind him.

He passed through an ante-room and went through another door. It led to a long, dimly lit room filled with row upon row of benches on which rested motionless forms draped with silvery plastisheets.

It might have been a morgue – but it wasn’t. Not quite. Eyes glittering with excitement, Solon moved to the nearest bench.

‘You, soldier!’ he barked. ‘Attention! On your feet!’

There was a stirring of movement beneath the covering sheet as the dreadful creature beneath came to life. The sheet dropped away as it rose to his feet and shambled towards him...

Shown, or rather shoved, into Hawken’s luxurious office, the Doctor paused, recovered his balance and looked around him curiously. The place was more like a study than an office –

indeed, it had much in common with his own study in the TARDIS. Walls lined with books, comfortable armchairs... One corner was occupied by a simple desk holding a combined computer terminal and com-unit.

‘Prisoner for interrogation, sir!’ screamed Altos, crashing to attention.

A huge man rose from behind the desk and came towards them.

‘No need for violence.’ he said in a deep, commanding voice.

‘All right, you can go now.’

‘Hadn’t I better stay, sir? This one’s a pretty ugly customer.

Bad attitude, sir.’

‘I think I can handle him. Out!’

‘Sir!’

Altos turned and stamped out.

The big man came to greet the Doctor, hand outstretched.

‘My dear fellow, here you are at last. I do apologise for the delay, pressure of work, you know... I’m Commander Hawken, Head of Security...’

The Doctor took the offered hand, which engulfed his own.

‘Is there any news?’ he asked urgently.

‘News?’

‘About my companion, the young woman I brought here.

She had a badly wounded arm, it was almost severed. Doctor Solon agreed to operate.’

‘I’ll check for you,’ said Hawken immediately. He was a great believer in establishing good relations at the start of an interrogation. He raised his voice. ‘Computer, report on the condition of Doctor Solon’s latest patient – human female with severe arm wound.’

The computer replied in a surprisingly seductive female voice.

‘Operation successfully concluded, prognosis good. Patient resting comfortably.’

‘The usual medical clichés,’ thought the Doctor. Still, it was good news as far as it went.

Commander Hawken seemed determined to be friendly. ‘I hope you’ve been well looked after?’

‘The accommodation was simple, but adequate – as dungeons go.’

Hawken looked shocked. ‘You don’t mean they put you in a cell?’

‘They probably thought that was the thing to do, since I’d been arrested.’

‘Not arrested,’ protested Hawken. ‘Detained pending further enquiries at most. Another bureaucratic foul-up I’m afraid.’

‘I’m sure,’ agreed the Doctor, not believing a word of it.

He’d had a taste of the hard treatment, this was the soft. If he didn’t cooperate, he’d be back in the cell soon enough.

‘Let me try to make amends,’ Hawken continued. ‘Have a comfortable chair.’ He ushered the Doctor to an armchair, then moved to a cabinet set in the wall. He flung open the doors, revealing an astonishing array of bottles, phials and flasks.

‘A drink? I can offer you anything from Algolian wine to *vrag*. We get patients from all over the galaxy here, and quite a few of them like to show their appreciation – those that survive!’

The doctors and surgeons get most of it, of course. But I’m customs officer here, so I have to take a sample of everything that comes in – just to make sure it’s all suitable, of course.’

‘Of course,’ agreed the Doctor.

Hawken turned around with a huge bottle in one hand and two goblets in the other. ‘Here we are, vintage champagne from Copernicus Two, just arrived!’ He popped the cork with an enormous thumb, filled both goblets with the foaming wine and handed one to the Doctor. ‘Your health, sir!’ He drained his goblet, refilled it, poured a splash more into the Doctor’s still untouched glass and lowered himself into an outsize armchair facing the Doctor.

The Doctor sat back in his chair, sipping his champagne, feeling somewhat bemused by the torrent of hospitality. If this was the soft approach, he'd never seen it carried so far before.

Maybe they were saving the rubber truncheons until later.

'Now,' said Hawken, taking another swig of champagne and wiping his lips. 'If you wouldn't mind, just one or two simple questions.' He raised his voice slightly. 'Computer record.'

'Recording.'

'You don't mind, do you?' asked Hawken. 'Just for my records.'

'Not at all,' said the Doctor politely. He knew that the question was no more than a polite formality. The room was almost certainly bugged, and all conversations would be recorded automatically.

'To begin with,' said Hawken, 'your name?'

The Doctor sighed. 'Here we go again,' he thought. 'Who are you and where do you come from? Why are you wearing those funny clothes and what's inside that blue box?'

Sometimes, of course, it could be avoided, if the trip was well planned so that you landed unobserved and arrived wearing clothes suitable for the time and planet.

But in emergencies like this one you just had to go through the old routine.

'Name?' said Hawken again.

'Smith,' said the Doctor firmly. 'Doc-' He broke off. Better not say anything that might stick in anyone's memory – like Doctor. 'Just plain John Smith.'

'And the name of your wounded companion?'

'Perpugilliam Brown.'

'Smith and Brown,' said Hawken. 'I see.'

The Doctor sighed, wishing he'd chosen some other alias.

'That's right,' he said. 'Two very numerous families...'

Chapter Four

Interrogation

Reverend Mother Maren stood at the entrance of the mountain cave that led to the Temple of the Flame, gazing out into Karn's ever-stormy skies. Thunder rumbled about the mountain tops, storm winds howled around the jagged peaks, and streaks of lightning zigzagged across the night sky. A typical night on Karn.

Maren stared into and through the storm clouds, as if looking into space and time itself.

Ohica, her chief acolyte, emerged from the cave to stand beside her. Unlike Maren, she had joined the Sisterhood of the Flame as a young woman. Now, thanks to the Elixir of Life, she was frozen eternally in her youth and beauty, just as Maren was crystallised in her old age.

'You are troubled, Reverend Mother,' said Ohica.

'A storm is coming.'

Ohica looked puzzled. 'There are always storms on Karn.'

'Not this,' said Maren contemptuously, waving a skinny claw at the stormy night. 'This is nothing. It is *maya*, illusion, the flux of being. I speak of a disturbance in the affairs of the galaxy, a storm in the history of worlds.'

'What gives you this feeling, Reverend Mother?'

'A stranger came today, to the Hospice,' said Maren slowly.

'He demanded my aid. He spoke the Words of Power.'

'A Time Lord?'

'Who else would know those words? But this I do know. His arrival is an omen, linked in some way to the storm of worlds which is to come. It plays about his head as the lightning plays about those peaks.'

In Hawken's office the Doctor's interrogation wasn't going too well. Politely, Hawken asked his questions. Even more politely, the Doctor evaded them.

'Look at it from my point of view,' pleaded Hawken. 'You arrive here unexpectedly, mysteriously, bypassing one of the most sophisticated

security systems in the galaxy. How did you manage it?’

‘Why does a Hospice, a place of healing, need a sophisticated security system?’ wondered the Doctor, countering one question with another.

‘Because we are not only a hospital but a semi-military establishment,’ said Hawken. ‘Some of our finance comes from private patients, true. Most comes from the planetary governments who employ us to look after wounded troops.’

‘Patching them up so they can go and fight again?’

‘We are an oasis of peace in a warring galaxy,’ said Hawken.

‘Many of our client planets are deadly enemies. Here they meet on neutral ground. The political position here is always delicate.

We walk a tightrope between opposing sides, and we are in constant danger.’

‘Danger from whom?’

‘From everybody,’ said Hawken simply. ‘There’s not a ruler in the galaxy doesn’t covet the Hospice of Karn – from petty warlords to mighty emperors.’

The Doctor nodded thoughtfully. ‘I can see why. Whoever controlled it could weaken his enemies by denying them its use –

or charge them a fortune for the privilege. Do you have any troops of your own?’

‘There’s a token defence force. Enough to hold off a preliminary attack and buy time to evacuate the medical staff and some of the patients. But we couldn’t stand up to a determined assault.’

The Doctor wondered why Commander Hawken was being so frank with him. Perhaps all this information was common knowledge. Or perhaps it was because, unless he could satisfy Hawken that he wasn’t dangerous, he would never leave Karn alive.

‘You’re in a tricky situation,’ he acknowledged. ‘So why *doesn’t* someone try to take you over?’

‘Mutual suspicion,’ said Hawken. ‘Anybody who tried would face attack from all the others. That and the fact that Karn is the home of the Sisterhood of the Flame.’

‘Is it really?’

‘Don’t pretend you don’t know about the Sisterhood. Their influence is enormous. They’re seers, prophetesses and, some say, witches.’ Hawken smiled wryly. ‘I myself have the privilege of an Adviser from the Sisterhood!’

‘That formidable old lady I met when I arrived?’

‘Reverend Mother Maren, Head of the Order – who seems to know you. She used her influence to get the Surgeon-General to see you. Where did you meet?’

‘We met for the first time here, in your reception area.’

Not quite true, thought the Doctor. He *had* met Maren before – in his past and her future – but she was meeting him for the first time. Still, this was no time to go into the paradoxes of time travel.

‘So why did you appeal to her?’ persisted Hawken.

‘I was desperate – and she looked like someone important.’

‘And why did she help you?’

‘Natural compassion?’ suggested the Doctor hopefully.

Hawken grunted. ‘Reverend Mother Maren is about as compassionate as a Drashig! She’s cunning, ruthless and incredibly devious. She cares only for one thing – the survival of the Sisterhood.’

Commander Hawken suddenly became aware that he was answering more questions than he was asking. There was something very engaging about Smith. Hawken realised that he was beginning to like him – which wouldn’t do at all. Liking people was unprofessional.

‘We seem to be wandering from the subject,’ he said sternly.

‘Which is?’

‘You! We’ve no real fear of a direct attack, for reasons I’ve explained. What we do fear is spies. People who come here in the guise of patients, doctors or delegates of some kind, hoping to find some weakness their employers can exploit.’

‘You think I might be a spy?’

‘Precisely. You turn up out of nowhere, bringing with you a wounded girl and, I am told, a mysterious blue box, which no one has been able to open.’

‘Is the blue box safe?’

‘Safe in my custody – like you. To continue – you have some mysterious influence with Reverend Mother Maren – which she refuses to explain. And you yourself refuse to explain anything!’

‘Because I’m not a spy and there’s nothing to explain. And remember the girl. Do you really think I’d mutilate my best friend just to help my cover story?’

‘I’ve known spies to mutilate *themselves* just to get inside the Hospice,’ Hawken paused. ‘Don’t force me to use methods which would be distasteful to me – and, if I may say so, even more distasteful to you.’

‘Here it comes,’ thought the Doctor. ‘The hard line after the soft approach.’

‘The rack and the thumbscrew?’ he suggested. ‘The Iron Maiden?’

‘The implements are all available,’ admitted Hawken.

‘Though only in the Castle museum. But certain members of my staff are experienced in methods almost equally crude. And if they fail – well, the Medical Research Section people are always looking for subjects for their experiments. You know how keen these doctors are. A limb here, an organ there. Let them get hold of a prisoner for a while and he comes back with half of him missing. It’s extremely distressing.’

‘Pretty distressing for the prisoner, I should think.’

‘Quite so. So please – be reasonable. Tell me who you are and why you’re here.’

The Doctor sat back in his chair. ‘I’d like to help you, Commander Hawken, I really would. But I’ve already told you all I can. I’m a simple traveller. I came here because my companion was severely wounded and I believed that Doctor Solon was the only man who could save her. All I ask is to be allowed to remain here until she has recovered. Give me my companion restored to health, and my blue box, and I’ll disappear and trouble you no more.’ He paused. ‘If it’s a matter of costs, I am not without resources. I’ll gladly pay for Peri’s

treatment, and my accommodation, in any galactic currency you care to mention.

Or if you prefer gold, or jewels. .’

Hawken considered for a moment. He could always turn this man over to the electroclubs of Altos and his colleagues -or to the even more gruesome methods of the Medical Research Section. But Hawken sensed a core of steel in Smith. Some men would die before they’d talk. Besides, there were Maren’s mysterious hints that Smith might be someone of importance.

He came to a decision. ‘I’m going to do something nobody in my business should ever do, Mr Smith. I’m going to trust you.

Give me your parole, promise you won’t try to escape, or do anything against the interests of the Hospice, and you can stay here as my guest until your friend has recovered.’

‘You can have my parole by all means. Besides, nothing would persuade me to leave here until Peri’s better.’

‘That’s settled then. I’ll have you taken to one of our guest suites you’ll find it considerably more comfortable than a cell.

Tomorrow, as soon as Doctor Solon gives permission, you can see your friend.’ He smiled. ‘By the time she’s better, I’ll know if I have to shoot you or not.’

Commander Hawken summoned an aide, and the Doctor was led away.

As soon as he had gone, Hawken said, ‘Computer! Full background security check on an individual using the name of John Smith... Details as follows...’

Peri awoke from a long nightmare. A nightmare of swooping savage beasts, of masked white-robed figures staring down at her. A nightmare of strange machinery and stabbing needles, of drugs flooding through her system and overwhelming her consciousness.

She awoke to find the Doctor by her bedside, eating grapes.

‘Hey,’ she said weakly. ‘Aren’t those supposed to be for me?’

‘It’s traditional,’ the Doctor assured her. ‘You bring the patient grapes

and then eat them all yourself. I don't mind sharing, though.'

He popped a grape into her mouth and she bit into it gratefully, the sweet tang of the juice relieving the dryness of her parched throat.

'More!'

The Doctor fed her several more grapes, until Peri waved him away. 'Water!'

He poured water from a jug on her bedside table and she drained the glass. She leaned back and studied her surroundings.

She was in a hospital bed in a white-walled hospital room with the Doctor sitting in a chair at her bedside.

'OK,' she said. 'What happened?'

'I took you to a nice peaceful planet and a pterodactyl-type creature did its best to bite your right arm off.'

Peri rolled her head rather apprehensively to her right and saw her arm lying on top of the covers. 'Still seems to be there.'

'It's been restored and repaired by Doctor Mehendri Solon himself.'

Peri tried to move her arm. It lifted a little and then flopped back. 'Doesn't seem to be much use. Is this Solon any good?'

'He's the greatest surgeon in the galaxy. He'll tell you that himself.'

'So how come my arm doesn't work so well?'

'Apparently it takes time for the new linkages to establish themselves properly. Full use will come back but it will take a little time.'

Peri felt a wave of tiredness sweeping over her. The brief conversation had been unexpectedly exhausting. 'Right. So where are we?'

'In the Hospice of Karn. The leading medical facility in the galaxy. Don't worry Peri, you're in good hands.'

'Nice to know,' said Peri, her voice fading.

She drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

The Doctor rose and stood looking down at her. He had told her the

truth – but not the whole truth.

Just before visiting her, he had snatched a brief interview with Solon.

‘The operation, was, of course, a complete success,’ Solon had assured him.

‘So Peri will regain full use of her arm?’

Solon shrugged. ‘Perhaps – if all goes well.’

‘And if it doesn’t?’

‘The restored linkages may be only partially accepted by the body.’

‘Which means?’

‘The patient will only regain partial usage of the arm. Or, of course, there may be total rejection.’

‘What happens then?’

‘The arm will die. And so of course will the patient, unless the arm is amputated.’

‘When will you know if you’ve achieved complete success?’

‘In due time,’ said Solon irritably. ‘I’ve done my best for your friend, Doctor. You really mustn’t expect miracles.’

Surrounded by his worshipping acolytes, he had swept away.

The Doctor watched him go, reflecting that it was hard to be utterly dependent upon somebody you despised.

Now, looking down at Peri’s sleeping form, the Doctor told himself that the miracle would happen, must happen. Before they left Karn, Peri would be restored to her old self.

He turned and moved quietly from the room.

Chapter Five

Storm Clouds

Commander Hawken was sitting in quarters even more luxurious than his own. He was sipping herbal tea from a china cup that was almost

lost in his giant hand, and wondering nervously if he ought to raise his little finger.

He was being granted an interview with Lord Delmar, Governor of the Hospice of Karn. Delmar was one of the few survivors of the clan of aristocratic warlords who had once ruled Karn. Exhausted by a disastrous series of internal and interplanetary wars, the war lords had declined as the Hospice arose. Now the Hospice was all that gave Karn any significance in galactic affairs.

Lord Delmar had the finest suite of rooms in the Castle that his family had once owned – still owned, at least in theory. It was situated at the top of the Great Tower and the plastiglass picture windows gave spectacular views of the surrounding mountain peaks. The room in which they sat was furnished in the cumbersome splendour of Old Karn. Its stone floors were strewn with the rugs made from the skins of the many savage beasts, now mostly extinct, that had once roamed Karn. Their heads, hunting trophies of Lord Delmar's ancestors, were mounted at intervals around the walls.

Hawken's carved wooden seat faced the mounted head of a giant sabre-tooth were-tiger. Its glassy eyes glared savagely at him, as if the beast had died hungry.

Averting his eyes, Hawken turned his attention back to Lord Delmar, who stood leaning against the carved stone mantelpiece, sipping his tea.

The blood of the warlords was running thin by Delmar's time, thought Hawken. Tall and skeletal, with bright blue eyes, wispy white hair and a drooping white moustache, the old man looked more like a professor or a museum curator than the descendant of a race of ruthless warriors.

Lord Delmar was well aware that his appointment as Governor was little more than a tribute to his distinguished ancestors, and he made little attempt to interfere in the day-to-day affairs of the Hospice, concerning himself only with the loftier matters of administration. All the same, he was a wily old gentleman, with good connections to many of the galaxy's ruling families, and Hawken valued his advice.

Now, however, Lord Delmar was seeking his.

'Well, Hawken, what d'you think?'

Hawken considered the proposition the old man had just outlined.

‘A peace conference, here? Why here?’

‘Where else?’ said Delmar. He produced a computer printout and handed it to Hawken. ‘Here, list of planets and suggested delegates. Half these fellers have been busy slitting each other’s throats for generations. Not one of them would trust any of the others to visit their home planet. Karn is practically the only neutral ground in this part of the galaxy.’

Hawken took out a pair of gold-rimmed half-glasses and perched them on the end of his nose. A simple laser-operation would have corrected his sight in minutes. But Hawken was terrified of operations. Besides, he liked the glasses.

He studied the list. 'Fangoria, Romark, Darkeen, Martak...

All pretty small-fry, low-tech planets. Half these delegates are little more than bandits and small-time warlords. What's behind all this? Why should they want to form an alliance?'

'Stop the big fellers gobbling them up, I imagine. They're on the fringes of some pretty powerful empires – and empires like to expand.'

Hawken considered. 'An alliance might be to their advantage, I suppose. I'm not sure it's to ours.'

'Why not?'

'While they're fighting each other, they're not attacking us.'

'They wouldn't dare,' said Lord Delmar confidently. 'Even in alliance they'd still be small beer. And the big powers wouldn't stand for it.'

'What do you think then, sir?'

'I think we'll have to agree. Bad public relations not to. Karn stands for peace these days. Don't think this alliance will do much good, but it can't do much harm. Extra work for you, I'm afraid.'

'We can cope,' said Hawken.

They discussed the details of the proposed conference for a little longer.

When they were finished Hawken said, 'There was one other thing, sir.'

'Yes?'

'The question of Smith.'

'Feller who popped up out of nowhere with a blue box and a wounded girl?'

It occurred to Hawken that, for all his apparent vagueness, Delmar

always seemed to know everything that was going on.

‘That’s the one, sir.’

‘What about him?’

‘Well, he’s been here for some time, sir, and Doctor Solon tells me the girl is almost cured.’

‘So?’

‘What do I do about him? Smith, I mean? Once the girl’s better...’

‘I take it you’ve checked up on the feller?’

‘I’ve tried to. There’s no trace of anyone matching his description on the security net. Nothing at all.’

‘Let him go.’

‘Sir?’

‘Once the girl’s better give him his blue box and let him go.

Good riddance.’

‘If you’re sure, sir...’

‘Think the feller might be a Time Lord,’ said Delmar abruptly. ‘Heard of the Time Lords, have you?’

‘I’ve *heard* of them, sir. Can’t say I know much about them.’

Delmar snorted. ‘Nobody does. Tricky devils. Come from some remote planet called Gallifrey in the constellation of Kasterborus. Supposed to have some pretty amazing powers when they choose to use them. Don’t mostly. Keep themselves to themselves.’

‘And what makes you think...’

‘Like I said, tricky devils. Good at covering their tracks. This blue box business has a Time Lord feel to it. Something else.’

‘Sir?’

‘There’s a legend that the Time Lords formed an alliance with the Sisterhood, back when the Order was just starting.

Could explain the link to Maren.'

'Are they a danger to us?'

Lord Delmar shook his head. 'No danger to anybody.

Strictly non-interventionist. Sit smug and safe on Gallifrey and watch the cosmos go by. No point in upsetting them unnecessarily, though. Let the feller go.'

'Just as you say, sir. Thank you for your advice. I'll start setting up arrangements for this peace conference.'

Commander Hawken bowed and took his leave.

As he made his way back to his own quarters, he realised that he was going to miss Smith. They had become almost friends in the long days of waiting. It was nice to know he wasn't going to have him shot... He decided to find Smith and give him the good news.

Some time later, the Doctor and Peri were walking on the long castle terrace, gazing down at the spectacular mountain scenery below.

The scream of a mountain hawk came from high above. Peri looked up apprehensively and clutched her right shoulder protectively.

'Don't worry Peri, there are no pterodactyl-type creatures surviving on Karn.'

Peri shuddered. 'You're sure?'

'I checked. I couldn't go through all that again.'

'*You* couldn't go through it!' Peri rubbed her right shoulder.

'Do you really think they'll let us go when I'm better?'

'Hawken just said so. I think he's a man of his word.'

'I hope so. I can't wait to get away from this place. There's something about the way Solon looks at me. .'

'Solon's a hard man to like,' said the Doctor. 'But we owe him a great deal.'

'I suppose so. OK, I know so. Anyway, I hardly ever see Solon these days. It's that assistant of his who's the real pain in the butt.'

‘What assistant?’

‘Creepy little guy with fair curly hair. Name’s Drago. Thinks the sun shines out of Solon’s stethoscope.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘I think I’ve seen him with Solon. He bothers you?’

‘He keeps tagging around after me. And he’s way too keen on physical check-ups. And as for blanket baths – I must be the cleanest patient in the hospital.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘I’ll have a word with Solon.’

‘Don’t bother, I can handle Drago. Anyway, we should be out of here pretty soon.’ She raised and flexed her right arm.

‘See?’

‘Very impressive.’

‘According to Drago, Solon’s pretty sure the operation was a complete success. Unless there’s a last-minute tissue rejection...’

‘Is that likely?’

Peri shook her head. ‘No – but apparently it’s always possible. Solon’s going to run some final tests on me tomorrow.

If the results are OK, then I’m in the clear.’

The Doctor squeezed her good shoulder. ‘You will be. Just concentrate on getting better so we can get out of here.’

Peri was looking over his shoulder. ‘Uh-oh, here he comes!’

‘Who?’

The Doctor turned and saw a thin, intense-looking young man in a surgeon’s tunic hurrying towards them. He had curly fair hair and glittering blue eyes. They glittered even more brightly as they followed the way the wind on the terrace plastered the thin hospital gown to Peri’s body.

‘Now, now, young lady, it’s back to bed for you. Mustn’t overexert yourself, you know. Besides, it’s time for another checkup.’

‘I had one a few hours ago,’ protested Peri.

‘Your condition needs constant monitoring –’

‘Oh, I don’t think another check-up is necessary,’ said the Doctor.

‘And who might you be?’

‘Miss Brown’s guardian. I brought her here.’

‘Well, you may be her guardian, but I’m her physician and -’

‘I always feel sorry for doctors. They have to be careful, don’t they? I mean the Intergalactic Medical Association’s code of conduct is very strict.’

Drago stared at him. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Oh, I think you do,’ said the Doctor. He spoke quietly, but there was something in his voice that chilled Drago with fear. ‘I knew a doctor once,’ he went on. ‘Young chap, much like yourself. He got into terrible trouble – improper advances to a female patient, I believe. They disbarred him, of course. He was lucky to get a job washing corpses in the hospital morgue.

Couldn’t stand it in the end, committed suicide – cut his throat with one of his own scalpels. Blood everywhere, messy business.’

Drago’s voice shook with fear and anger. ‘I will not tolerate this interference...’

‘Just go away and stop bothering Miss Brown,’ said the Doctor gently. ‘Or must I make a formal complaint to Doctor Solon? With copies to Commander Hawken, Reverend Mother Maren and the Governor...’

Drago went white. He gave the Doctor a glance of hatred and turned and fled.

The Doctor watched him go. ‘That seems to have cooled him down a bit. I don’t think you’ll have any more trouble, Peri.

Let me know if you do.’

‘I’ll be all right. Don’t go stirring things up, Doctor!’

‘Me?’ said the Doctor. ‘Come on, let’s get you back to bed.’

Chapter Six

Project Z

Because of Solon's pressure of work, the final tests on Peri took place much later that same night. Brusquely awakened, a sleepy and disgruntled Peri was hooked up to various pieces of equipment and put through a variety of exercises. She stumbled out of bed and bent and stretched and swung and flexed both her mended right arm and the undamaged left. All the time she was aware of Drago's eyes on her body.

Peri endured it all with grim resolution, telling herself that, with any luck, this would be the very last time. Finally, blood and skin samples were taken and she was allowed to go back to bed.

Irritated and exhausted, she felt herself drifting back into sleep.

For a while she hovered between sleep and waking – then she heard voices beside her bed. For a moment she thought she was dreaming. Then she realised Solon and Drago hadn't yet left

– they were having a heated discussion. Although they were talking in low tones, their words were perfectly audible in the silence of the room.

After a moment, Peri realised that they were talking about Drago's recent confrontation with the Doctor. Suddenly awake and alert, she listened closely.

'He threatened me with the IMA,' hissed Drago furiously.

'We must deal with him before it's too late.'

Solon seemed more amused than annoyed. 'You must be more discreet, Drago. I've warned you before. Smith's quite right

– we medical men can't be too careful.'

'You don't understand the urgency, Surgeon-General. You remember you said that Smith might not survive Hawken's interrogation, or that he might be handed over to us?'

'Well?'

'Nothing of the kind! He and Hawken are cronies – Smith isn't even locked up!'

‘What of it?’

‘Now that the girl has recovered, they’re both going to be allowed to leave. I asked Hawken about it, and he said the Governor had authorised it. Soon they’ll both be out of our hands.’

‘What of it?’ said Solon again. ‘Let them go, and good riddance.’

‘But the girl – you yourself said...’

‘My dear Drago, there are plenty of other girls – girls without attached political complications. This one, I agree, is a particularly splendid specimen – but she’s not worth embroiling ourselves in a tangle with Commander Hawken and the Governor. Nor is this mysterious Smith. Let them go.’

Solon’s attraction to Peri had been a passing fancy, and it had faded under the pressure of affairs. Only with Drago had she become an obsession.

‘I still think they could be a danger to us,’ said Drago sulkily.

‘Why?’ asked Solon and Drago had no answer. But he didn’t give up.

‘Smith should suffer an accident. And the girl could have a relapse – when we’ve finished with her.’

‘No!’ said Solon. ‘It’s not worth the risk. Now, if you’ve finished maundering on, there are more urgent matters to attend to. Project Z still isn’t going as well as I’d hoped.’

‘Then abandon it,’ said Drago urgently. ‘It’s too dangerous, I always said so.’ He shuddered. ‘If the IMA ever got hold of that, not even your reputation would survive the scandal. We’d both be finished.’

‘I will not give up,’ said Solon coldly. ‘Give up a project that would make *me* the supreme power in the galaxy when I’m so close to success? Come along, I’ll show you my latest attempt, it’s in the ante-room. It looks promising, but there are still some puzzling flaws...’

Their voices faded as they left the room.

Wide awake, and no longer tired, Peri slipped out bed and followed them. She was well aware of the risk she was taking –

but, like the Doctor, she had an insatiable curiosity.

She peered out of her room and was just in time to see Solon and Drago turn the corner into the next corridor. Bare feet silent on the stone floor, she followed after them. A hospital never sleeps, but Peri knew she was in a private wing, with, at the moment, no other patients. So with any luck...

She reached the corner, peered round and saw the pair walking along the corridor. They turned off again and Peri ran to the next corner.

Using the same technique, she tracked them to a narrow corridor that ended in a dead-end. Peering around the corner, she saw Drago take a round metallic disc from his pocket and press it against the dead-end wall.

A door slid open and Solon and Drago went inside. The door closed behind them. Peri waited for a moment and then decided not to push her luck. She turned and hurried back to her room, taking care to memorise the route along the way. Minutes later she was back in bed. She lay awake for a while thinking over what she'd seen – then she really did go to sleep.

When the Doctor visited her next morning, Peri poured out the whole story – and found, to her disgust, that the Doctor was only mildly interested.

He sat back in his chair, eating the grapes he'd brought for her as usual, and when Peri had finished he said, 'Well, well, well!'

'Is that all you've got to say?' demanded Peri. 'What are we going to do?'

'Nothing,' said the Doctor simply. 'If Solon and Drago are carrying out some beastly secret experiment, I don't want to know about it.'

'But they're out to get us – especially me!'

'Drago's out to get us, true. But you said yourself; Solon vetoed the idea. So – he leaves us alone and we leave him alone.'

'But Solon said this Project Z would make him master of the galaxy.'

'It'll never happen,' said the Doctor. 'Believe me, I know!'

This project, whatever it is, isn't working – and it's not going to work. Forget it.'

‘I still think we ought to do *something* –’

The Doctor leaned forward. ‘Listen, Peri,’ he said urgently.

‘There are good reasons why I must intervene in Solon’s life as little as possible. We’re just waiting for the results of your tests, then, as your countrymen say, we’re out of here!’

‘But Doctor –’

The Doctor sighed. ‘Tell you what, I’ll have a quiet word with Commander Hawken. If there’s anything to investigate, he can investigate – after we’ve gone.’

And he refused to discuss it any further.

Commander Hawken was his usual hospitable self when the Doctor called in on him later that day. He listened to the Doctor’s tale, made several notes, and said, ‘I’ll look into it, Doctor – when I’ve got time.’

‘No hurry – in fact I’d very much prefer it if you’d leave it until after we’ve left.’

‘I’ll probably have to – snowed under with preparations for the peace conference.’

‘What peace conference?’ asked the Doctor.

Hawken told him. ‘It’s an odd business, really. Handful of planets on the rim of the galaxy want to form an alliance. Seems one of them’s thrown up a charismatic leader, calls himself the General.’

‘What’s odd about it?’

Hawken rubbed his chin with a massive hand. ‘It’s a pretty scruffy collection of planets, run mostly by pirates, bandits and warlords. Not your usual peace-making types – scum of the galaxy really. This General, whoever he is, must be a pretty persuasive type to get them all pulling together.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘If the best people won’t talk to you, maybe you have to start with the scum. I’d like to meet this General. When’s the conference?’

‘Not finalised yet, but very soon. Might even happen before you go.’

Later that evening, Assistant-Surgeon Drago called in to check on Peri

in her room. His manner was tentative and subdued, but he found her unexpectedly friendly.

He told her that her test results were still being processed, and that so far they were looking good. Final results would come through some time tomorrow.

Peri was lying flat on her back in bed and she looked up at him appealingly.

‘Could you help me to sit up, Doctor Drago? I’d like something to drink and I’m still feeling pretty weak.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Drago eagerly. He leaned over her, hands under her arms, and lifted her up. Peri drew a deep breath

– which was quite enough to distract Drago from the hand slipping into his tunic pocket...

He settled her against the pillows and poured her a glass of fruit cordial. He seemed disposed to stay and chat, but Peri leaned back and yawned, eyes closing.

‘I seem to be dropping off again. Do stay, Doctor Drago, I’m expecting my friend any minute. He always comes in to say goodnight...’

Drago jumped up and scuttled towards the door. ‘Sorry, must go, ward rounds you know.’ He hurried off.

Peri opened her eyes and looked at the silver disc in her palm. Now all she had to do was wait.

When she’d waited as long as she could bear, and everything seemed quiet, Peri got out of bed, put on her robe and slipped out of her room. She padded barefoot along the stone corridors, seeing no one, and came at length to the dead-end with the hidden door.

She stood for a moment studying the rough stone wall, and looked down at the gleaming disc in her hand. ‘Here’s the key, but where’s the keyhole?’

She tried to remember the spot in the wall where Drago had applied the disc, and ran her fingers over the general area. There was a cunningly disguised recess, the same size as the disc. She fitted the disc into the recess and a door slid back. Recovering the disc, Peri went inside, and the door closed behind her.

She was in a small, stone-walled ante-room, with another door beyond.

In the centre of the room was a stone bench on which lay a sheet-covered form.

Peri felt a pang of disappointment. Was this all – a mortuary and a corpse? Was Solon perfecting some revolutionary new method of embalming? There had to be more to Project Z than that.

Steeling herself, Peri went over to the sheet and pulled it back.

A dead face looked up at her.

It was the face of a tough-looking man in middle age. An incredibly deep scar made a crevice across the forehead, and a stubble of grey beard covered the jutting chin. Peri laid her left hand on the wounded forehead.

It was icy cold. The man was dead all right, no doubt about that. Then the dead eyes opened and glared redly up at her, and a dead hand clamped around her wrist.

Chapter Seven

Revenge

Peri screamed and jumped back. Still holding her wrist, the ghastly thing on the bench lurched to its feet. The sheet fell away revealing the whole form – a form fully as ghastly as its face.

The naked body was seamed and scarred with the signs of terrible wounds. Worse than that, the whole thing was lopsided, torso and limbs curiously mismatched. The arm of the hand that held her was white, the other a mottled green.

Desperately, Peri tried to wrench herself free. For a moment the thing resisted, then it seemed to loosen its grip. But her left wrist felt strangely heavy.

She looked down at her wrist and her eyes opened wide in horrified disbelief. The hand that had held her hadn't released its grip. It had simply pulled away from the creature's arm. It dangled now from her wrist, ending in a jagged stump.

Peri shook her arm furiously, but the dead fingers maintained their

grip. Suddenly she became aware that the dead thing was staggering towards her with a lurching, uneven gait.

She turned and ran for the door.

Fortunately, the door on this side was faced in metal, not rock, and the key-recess easily found. She pressed home the disc and recovered it, and the door slid back. Peri ran through it and fled back along the corridors at top speed, not daring to look behind her. She was all too aware of the horrible thing that dangled from her wrist, and she shook the wrist as she ran, trying frantically to dislodge it, but the cold fingers held fast.

Not until she reached the door of her room did she dare to look back and was relieved to see the corridor silent and empty.

Perhaps the door had closed again before the thing was able to get through.

Safe in her room, she renewed her efforts to free her wrist from its ghastly appendage. After several savagely violent shakes of her wrist the hand still clung to her. Gritting her teeth, Peri grabbed one of the scaly fingers and bent it back until it snapped. She attacked another finger and another... At last the hand's grip slackened and it dropped to the floor.

Peri watched in horror as the fist clenched and unclenched convulsively several times. At last it lay still.

She looked round and saw the crystal bowl containing fruit on her bedside table. She tipped out the remaining fruit, grabbed a hand-towel and scooped the hand into the bowl. Shuddering, she covered the bowl with the towel, carried it over to a corner locker, and shoved it to the back of the top shelf. She closed the locker and wedged a chair under the handle.

Peri went into the adjoining bathroom and held her left wrist under the basin tap. Warm soapy water gushed out and she scrubbed her wrist till the skin was sore.

Then she went to bed and lay shivering under the covers.

She drifted at last into an uneasy sleep, dreaming that the hand had climbed out of the locker and was crawling across the floor towards her.

The Doctor lifted the cloth from the top of the bowl and studied the ghastly object inside with scientific interest. He produced a silver propelling pencil from his pocket and poked it gently. The hand didn't move. It simply looked dead now, decayed even, and it was giving off a faint, unpleasant smell.

'Fascinating,' he murmured. He looked across at Peri who was sitting up in bed, white-faced and hollow-eyed. 'Well, you've had a very nasty experience, Peri,' he said, not particularly sympathetically. 'And thoroughly well deserved if I may say so.'

'Thanks a bunch,' said Peri bitterly.

'Tell me again about this thing you saw. Could it have been, oh, I don't know, the results of a botched transplant operation?'

'No, it couldn't,' said Peri positively. 'It was something quite different – a sort of horrible zombie.'

'And it was human – humanoid anyway?'

'More or less. But it was all kind of mixed up, lopsided, as if the bits didn't fit together.'

The Doctor nodded, studying the hand. 'The evidence supports you there. This hand isn't human.'

'Don't you see, Doctor? This proves that Solon is carrying out some ghastly experiment.'

'We knew that anyway,' said the Doctor impatiently. 'In theory at least.'

'We did?'

'Your first bit of snooping established that much. Why couldn't you let well alone?'

'But we've got proof now. We've got to do something about it.'

'Why? It's still no business of ours.'

'We've got to find out what Solon's up to, what Project Z is all about.'

'My dear girl, the purpose of Project Z is perfectly obvious.

The creation, or rather the re-creation, of life. Every mad scientist's

dream since dear old Doctor Frankenstein.'

'Then he's got to be stopped!'

'Why?' said the Doctor again.

'You remember what Solon was saying to Drago, when I overheard? He said Project Z was going to make him master of the galaxy. Don't you see, Doctor? He's going to make a whole army of those ghastly things and take over everything.'

'I doubt it,' said the Doctor. He nodded towards the dead hand. 'Not with this standard of workmanship anyway. What's the use of a soldier who keeps going all to pieces?'

'Maybe he's only just starting. Suppose he improves the process? Suppose the experiment finally succeeds?'

'It won't,' said the Doctor definitely. He leaned forward urgently. 'I've told you before, Peri, there are excellent reasons why I mustn't interfere in Solon's life. All I want to do is to get you well and then get you away from here, leaving Solon to work out his own destiny. As it happens, I've a pretty good idea what that will be. And it definitely isn't ruling the galaxy with an army of zombies!'

Peri looked curiously at him. 'There's something going on, isn't there? You've met Solon before.'

'In a way.'

'So why doesn't he recognise you?'

'I look very different now. Besides, it was only before for me, it's after for him.'

Peri looked baffled. 'Doctor, what the hell are you talking about?'

The Doctor held up his hand. 'Never mind that now. Just take my word for it. If I intervene too much in Solon's life, it could distort the entire time-stream – and I'm in quite enough trouble with my own people already.'

'So we just leave Solon to get on with it?'

The Doctor nodded. 'We both know he's a nasty piece of work. But don't forget, he's also doing good, saving lives every day – including yours. If he likes to mess about with corpses in his spare time – well, it

doesn't do the dead any harm, and every boy needs a hobby. Once you're well, I'll persuade Hawken to give me access to the TARDIS and we'll be gone.'

'All right,' said Peri wearily. 'Whatever you say, Doctor.' She pointed to the hand in the bowl. 'What do we do with my little souvenir?'

The Doctor threw the towel back over the bowl. 'I shall return it to its rightful owner with apologies for any inconvenience. If I can convince Solon we're not interested, he'll leave us alone.'

Peri produced the silver disc from the pocket of her robe.

'And this?'

The Doctor thought for a moment. 'Next time Drago comes back, tell him you found it in your bed. Say it must have dropped out of his pocket.'

Peri dropped the disc on her bedside table. 'He'll never believe that!'

'Maybe not, but what can he say? With any luck he'll keep quiet about the whole business, he won't want Solon to know he ever lost it.' The Doctor picked up the fruit bowl and its gruesome contents. 'I'll come and see you later this afternoon.'

He turned as Drago came into the room. 'Ah, there you are, Mr Drago. Don't worry, I'm just off. No more blanket baths now!'

He strolled away.

Peri couldn't help smiling. Since his confrontation with the Doctor, Drago's check-ups had consisted of a bit of pulse-taking and a few cursory questions.

Peri didn't have a chance to give him the silver disc-key. He spotted it on her bedside table, rushed over and snatched it up.

'Where did you get this?'

Peri gave him her best wide-eyed innocent look. 'I found it in my bedclothes. Is it yours?'

'I've been looking everywhere. How did it end up in your bed?'

'I know,' said Peri. 'You remember that time you helped me to sit up? It must have dropped out then.'

Drago frowned. 'I don't see how. I always put it away carefully.'

'What is it?' asked Peri. 'Is it something important?'

To Drago's relief, his wrist-com buzzed urgently. He held it to his ear. 'Yes?' His expression changed. 'At once, Surgeon-General.' He turned to Peri. 'The Surgeon-General wants to see me immediately,' he said importantly. 'I'll check on you later.' He held up the disc. 'Best say nothing about this.'

'I won't if you won't,' said Peri.

Drago hurried from the room.

A few minutes later he hurried into Solon's luxurious office, puffing slightly since he'd run all the way. 'You sent for me, Surgeon General?'

'Close the door you fool,' snarled Solon.

Drago obeyed and turned to face the full blast of Solon's fury. 'By what right do you interfere with my experiments?'

'I don't understand,' stammered Drago.

Solon lowered his voice, but it was still shaking with anger. 'I took advantage of a few spare moments to check up on Project Z. Do you know what I found?'

'Surgeon-General, I have no idea.'

'I found my latest and most promising subject huddled on the floor close to the door. Someone must have stimulated it from its dormant state. What's more, part of the subject was missing – the hand. What the hell are you up to? Thinking of stealing a march on me, setting up on your own?'

Drago was almost weeping. 'I assure you, Surgeon-General, I haven't visited the Project Z lab since our last visit together.'

'It must have been you. That door is impregnable, and you have the only key besides mine. Haven't lost it, have you?'

Drago went pale. He took the disc-key from his tunic pocket. 'No. Surgeon-General, I still have my key.'

'Then it was you!'

Miserably Drago shook his head. ‘For some hours last night, the key was out of my possession.’

‘What are you blathering about?’

Drago told him the story of his recent encounter with Peri.

‘She said the disc must have fallen from my pocket – earlier, when I was helping her to sit up in bed.’

‘She stole it, of course,’ said Solon. ‘While you were ogling her charms, you lecherous fool.’

‘I’m sure I would have noticed...’

‘Noticed! You wouldn’t have noticed if she’d stolen your tunic and shirt as well. She must have the hand!’

‘I encountered the Doctor as well – he was leaving the girl as I arrived. He was carrying something – in a bowl covered by a towel.’

‘So the Doctor has it. If he takes it to Hawken...’ Solon’s voice trailed away. He sat staring into space for what seemed like a very long time. Drago watched him, not daring to move or speak.

At last Solon spoke. ‘Drago, I am a genius.’

‘The whole galaxy knows that, Surgeon-General.’

Accepting the compliment as no less than his due, Solon went on, ‘I have conceived a plan. A plan which will punish the girl, deal with the Doctor – and, perhaps, ensure the success of Project Z.’

He unlocked a drawer in his desk and took out a small one-use hypodermic.

‘Inject the girl with this, Drago. In the upper right arm. Let me know when it takes effect.’

Drago took the hypodermic and studied it. His eyes widened. ‘It may kill her.’

Solon smiled. ‘That’s a risk she’ll have to take.’

Chapter Eight

Relapse

Tired after her eventful and restless night, Peri was dozing when Drago came quietly into her room. She was vaguely aware of him pushing up the sleeve of her nightgown, and of the tiniest of pinpricks in her upper arm.

‘What’s going on?’ she muttered.

‘Just a vitamin supplement,’ said Drago soothingly. ‘It may make you a little drowsy...’

He stood watching by the bed as Peri drifted back into sleep.

Then he drew up a chair and settled down to wait, eyes fixed on Peri’s sleeping form.

After a while, Peri began stirring uneasily. A red flush spread along her bare right arm. She began writhing and twisting uneasily and beads of sweat broke out on her forehead.

‘Such a pity,’ whispered Drago. ‘Such a waste...’

Solon was still at his vast ornate desk when the Doctor strolled in, brushing past an outraged secretary. He was carrying a towel-covered crystal bowl.

‘Ah, Doctor Frankenstein, I presume,’ said the Doctor cheerily. He put the bowl on the desk in front of Solon. ‘Your property, I believe.’

Solon lifted the cloth, studied the decaying claw-like hand for a moment and then replaced the cloth. ‘The fingers are broken,’ he complained peevishly. ‘Your young friend’s irresponsible behaviour has ruined a valuable experiment.’

The Doctor sat down, very much at home. ‘Oh, I doubt it.

Any experiment that tries to graft a reptilian hand onto a human arm is more idiotic than valuable.’

‘Interspecies transplantation is the whole purpose of the experiment, Mr Smith. Compatible limbs and organs are not always available. Better a reptilian hand than none at all.’

‘No question of a lunatic attempt to create a zombie army then? Just a humanitarian experiment to help the wounded soldier?’

‘What else?’

‘You can tell that story if you want to,’ said the Doctor. ‘I wouldn’t give much for your chances of being believed. They’re a sceptical lot in the Intergalactic Medical Association.’ He held up his hand, cutting off Solon’s angry reply. ‘Don’t worry, you won’t have to tell it. Complete Miss Brown’s cure and I’ll keep quiet about the whole thing. So will Miss Brown, and there’ll be no more attempts to interfere.’

Solon looked up and the Doctor studied his face. He ought to have been crushed and resentful – but he wasn’t. Instead there was a gleam of triumph in his eye. The Doctor had an uneasy feeling he was missing something.

‘I’d like to accept your generous offer, Mr Smith,’ said Solon.

‘Unfortunately I may no longer be in a position to do so.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Your rash young friend broke into a dangerous environment while still in a convalescent condition. She took no precautions, wore no protective clothing. There have been – consequences.’

The Doctor jumped up. ‘Consequences? What consequences? She was fine when I left her just now.’

‘These things take time to develop. Doctor Drago is with her now; he’s extremely concerned about her condition.’

‘He’ll be concerned about his own if there’s anything wrong with Peri,’ said the Doctor. ‘Come on!’

He hurried from the room. Solon followed, a half-smile on his lips.

The Doctor looked down at Peri, his face appalled. She was barely conscious, flushed and sweating, writhing uneasily on the hospital bed. Her right arm was bright scarlet and badly swollen, and the upper part was swathed in bandages. ‘What’s happened to her?’ he demanded.

‘She’s picked up some infection that’s triggered tissue rejection,’ said Solon. ‘The toxins are spreading through her entire body.’

‘Do something for her!’

‘We are doing all we can, Mr Smith. No physician likes to lose a patient. But her chances aren’t good.’

The Doctor glared suspiciously from one to the other of them. He sensed, he *knew* that something was wrong. Perhaps they'd given her something – but what? If he didn't know the drug, how could he find the antidote? He could try to choke the truth out of Solon, but if he failed, Peri would die.

The Doctor decided he was helpless. He had medical knowledge of his own, but nothing to compare with that of Solon. Was he going to stand here and watch these two murder Peri before his eyes? He forced himself to be calm. If this was a plot, then it was due to more than pointless malice. Solon wanted something.

'There's just one possibility,' said Solon. 'One chance – if you're willing to help.'

'I'll do anything I can.'

'As you know, Karn is the home of the Sisterhood of the Flame. They are the only source of an elixir – the Elixir of Life.

They dole it out sparingly, but its properties are miraculous. A small supply of the Elixir would undoubtedly save the life of your friend.'

So that was the deal – Peri's life in return for the Elixir.

'Very well,' said the Doctor. 'I'll do what I can. But I promise you this. If Peri's dead when I return, or if she doesn't recover afterwards, I'll kill you both.'

He left the room, leaving a stunned silence behind him. 'He means it,' whispered Drago. 'I saw death in his eyes.'

'Nonsense,' said Solon uneasily. He took a hypodermic and a phial from his pocket. 'Give her a little of the antidote – not too much, just enough to stabilise her. I want her exactly like this –

or perhaps just a little worse – when Mr Smith returns.'

'And if he doesn't return?'

'Let her die.'

Dressed for Karn weather in boots and a heavy fur coat, the Doctor tramped along the snowy pass that led to the Temple of the Flame.

Coat and boots had been issued from stores by Hawken, who had been more than helpful when the Doctor had explained his desperate need.

He'd readily extended the Doctor's parole beyond the bounds of the Castle.

'I'd offer you transport Mr Smith, but nothing can fly or hover amongst those peaks. You can get there and back in a day on foot – or a week if the weather closes in. It's pretty good at the moment. I'll draw you a map...'

'It's all right,' said the Doctor. 'I know the way.'

Hawken had looked curiously at him, but had made no comment.

The Doctor trudged on through the mountain pass, huddled deep into the fur coat, snow flurries stinging his face. If this weather was 'pretty good', he'd hate to be on Karn when it was bad. But then, of course, he had been – or rather would be.

He wondered what sort of reception the Sisterhood would give him. On his previous visit – previous for him anyway –

they'd been distinctly hostile. But by that time, in what to them was the distant future, their power and influence had been shattered by galactic war. The embittered survivors had retreated to their sacred Temple of the Flame. With the source of the Elixir apparently drying up, they had become paranoid and suspicious, convinced that any stranger had come to steal what remained of the precious fluid.

Now, in this earlier time, their power and influence was still at its peak and the Elixir was in full flow. Perhaps that would make them more generous. It might, of course, make them more arrogant, ready to crush anyone they even suspected might be a danger to them.

The Doctor was reasonably confident of being able to counter any psychic force the Sisters might bring to bear. But no amount of mental conditioning is proof against a well-placed rock on the head. He glanced apprehensively upwards, but there was no avalanche, not yet. Encouraged, the Doctor went on his way. He came at last to a cave entrance set into the mountainside.

The cave looked ordinary enough, but the Doctor knew that it led to a tunnel, and the tunnel to an ante-chamber deep in the heart of the mountain. Beyond the ante-chamber was the Temple of the Flame.

The Doctor drew a deep breath. Then, doing his best to project feelings of peace and goodwill, he went into the cave.

In the temple, old Maren sat on her throne of rock before the bronze gates that concealed the sacred flame. The gloom of the temple was illuminated by the flames of blazing torches set in brackets on the rock walls. Black-robed figures stood motionlessly about the temple.

‘He comes,’ she said.

The young woman at Maren’s side said calmly, ‘What is your will, Reverend Mother? Shall we kill him?’

She nodded to the Sisterhood guards beside the door. They carried long tridents with needle-sharp points.

Maren considered. ‘Not yet, Ohica. He knows the risk. I am curious to know why he comes here.’

‘Can you not sense his purpose, Reverend Mother?’

Maren shook her head. ‘His inner mind is shielded. But I detect no danger. Only goodwill, determination and, beneath, great anguish.’

They waited patiently while the Doctor traversed the tunnel, the ante-chamber, and came at last to the temple. Passing between the guards, he came and stood before Maren’s throne, bowing respectfully.

‘Once again I come to beg for your help, Reverend Mother.

Not for myself, but for my companion.’

‘Were the talents of Mehendri Solon not sufficient?’ asked Maren ironically.

‘At first, yes, Reverend Mother. But now infection has set in.

Without the Elixir, my friend will die before nightfall.’

‘Solon tells you this?’

‘Yes, Reverend Mother.’

‘Solon constantly pesters us for the Elixir. At first we gave freely, believing it was needed for healing. Then we discovered that he was using it to further his foul experiments on the bodies of the dead. We disapprove of such abominations and since then we have denied him. Have you considered that this may be some trick of Solon’s to obtain more?’

The Doctor looked into Maren's shrewd old eyes. It would, he decided, be fatal to lie. 'That may be so, Reverend Mother.'

But the life of my friend is in Solon's hands. I'm only certain of one thing. If I don't bring Solon the Elixir very soon, she will die.'

Maren held his gaze for a moment, then nodded slowly.

'What do you offer in return?'

'Anything I can give.'

'You are a Time Lord, are you not? A high-ranking one?'

The Doctor smiled, a little ruefully. 'I was once. Now I am an exile and a fugitive. I have little influence with my people.'

Maren considered, staring broodingly into space. To the Doctor the wait seemed endless. Then, unexpectedly, she smiled.

'Once again you are fortunate, Time Lord. My humour is good, and at present the Elixir flows freely. Ohica!'

The woman at Maren's side turned and went to a recess beside the bronze gates that guarded the scared flame. She returned with a stone phial. At a nod from Maren, she handed it to the Doctor.

'Thank you, Reverend Mother. Now, if you will forgive me, time is short.'

Maren smiled again. 'There too, we can help you.' She pointed to a spot in the centre of the temple. 'Stand there!'

The Doctor obeyed.

Maren turned to Ohica. 'Form the circle.'

A circle of black-robed young women formed around the Doctor. He looked around at their faces – all different, all curiously alike. Placid, serene, agelessly beautiful.

'Like statues,' thought the Doctor. 'Or waxworks!'

He knew that when a woman was initiated into the Sisterhood, her age was frozen at the time she joined. It remained so eternally – as long as she regularly consumed the Elixir. Only Maren was the exception. Already old when the secret of the Elixir was discovered,

for her eternal life meant eternal old age.

As these thoughts passed through his mind, the Doctor realised that the Temple of the Flame had faded from around him. He was back in the Castle of Karn, standing in the reception hall of the Hospice, clutching the stone phial of Elixir in his hand.

‘Spot of teleportation,’ he thought. ‘They even did it with the TARDIS once – or rather they will do.’

He glanced quickly at the recess where the TARDIS had materialised. It was gone, of course, lugged away and placed under guard by Hawken’s men.

Minutes later the Doctor was striding along the hospital corridors, a surprised Solon beside him, struggling to keep up.

‘You made very good time, Mr Smith. It’s still afternoon, I didn’t expect you before nightfall.’

‘I had help. How is she?’

‘Much the same. We’ve managed to slow down the spread of the infection. Drago’s with her.’

When they turned into Peri’s room, Drago jumped up from his chair.

‘No change, Surgeon-General.’

They studied the figure on the bed. Peri looked much the same as when the Doctor had last seen her. Her face was shiny with sweat, her arm red and swollen, and she writhed uneasily to and fro.

‘We may yet be in time,’ said Solon. ‘The Elixir please. I will administer it myself. Doctor Drago will assist me. If you will stand back, please.’

‘Can’t I do it myself?’

‘No,’ said Solon firmly. ‘The young lady is my patient.’ He held out his hand. ‘The Elixir, please, Mr Smith. Every second is vital.’

There was no point in arguing. The Doctor handed over the stone phial and Solon and Drago crowded around Peri, screening her from his view.

‘Hold her still will you, Drago?’ said Solon. ‘She’s still very agitated

and I don't want to risk spilling any.'

The Doctor saw Drago bend over Peri. A few seconds later, Solon straightened up. He turned and handed the surprised Doctor an empty stone phial.

'I used it all. More than was necessary, perhaps, but she's in a critical state. Better not to take any chances.'

The Doctor looked down at the empty phial. Had he misjudged Solon?

He crossed over to the bed and looked down at Peri. She looked much the same as before.

'The Elixir doesn't seem to be acting at its usual amazing speed. Results are usually instantaneous.'

Solon shook his head. 'The infection was very advanced.

Even with the Elixir, recovery will take some time. There's nothing to do now but wait.'

'I'll stay with her,' said the Doctor.

'Very well,' said Solon. 'I'll check on the patient later.' He indicated a control panel above the bed. 'Use the com-unit to summon help if there's any change for the worse.'

Solon and Drago left and the Doctor sat down by Peri's bed.

He unstopped the stone phial and sniffed it curiously, then frowned thoughtfully.

He settled down to wait.

Chapter Nine

Arrival

Afternoon turned into evening, and evening to night. To the Doctor's enormous relief, Peri's condition slowly improved. Her temperature went down and her flushed skin returned to its usual colour. Gradually the swelling in the arm diminished – by nightfall it was back to normal size. The writhing and moaning stopped too, giving way to an exhausted sleep.

White-robed nurses came in and chased the Doctor away while they

washed and sponged her, changing the sweat-soaked nightgown and bed linen and removing the bandages from her arm. When they'd finished the Doctor resumed his vigil. Since he refused to budge, a nurse brought him a tray of food and drink.

Peri awoke early next morning, a little weak but otherwise normal. She demanded breakfast, and the Doctor called the nursing station for a tray.

When the meal was finished Peri said weakly, 'What happened?'

'You got ill. Very ill, very suddenly.'

'How come?'

'According to Solon, you picked up an infection in his secret laboratory. He said you'd die if I didn't get some Elixir of Life.'

'Some what?'

'It's a kind of magic potion, produced here on Karn. So I went and got some.'

'And it cured me?'

'I'm not sure...'

'Well, I'm better.'

The Doctor produced a watchmaker's eye-glass and examined Peri's right arm, just below the shoulder. 'Aha!'

'Aha what?'

'Two small puncture marks, close together. . '

Peri looked alarmed. 'Vampires?'

'Injections,' said the Doctor. 'And here's a third... The first one's considerably older than the others. So that's how they did it!'

'Did what?'

'I don't think you were ever infected at all. It was all a trick of Solon's to get his hands on some more Elixir. He injected you with something to make you ill, switched bottles on me, then injected you with something to make you better. I suspected the switch from the first.'

‘Why?’

‘Because of the curious incident of the stone phial.’

‘What phial?’

The Doctor took a stone phial from his pocket and handed it to Peri.

‘Smell it.’

She took off the top and sniffed it. ‘It’s empty.’

‘What can you smell?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Exactly!’ said the Doctor triumphantly. ‘As my old friend Sherlock once said, “That is the curious incident!”’

‘Stop being enigmatic, Doctor, and explain.’

‘The Elixir has a very pungent smell. Not unlike stewed apricots. This phial was already dry and odourless when Solon gave it to me last night. It’s been empty for quite some time.’

As she took in what had happened to her, Peri felt a wave of anger.

‘I remember now – Drago gave me an injection, just before I got ill!’

The Doctor nodded. ‘On Solon’s orders I imagine.’

‘So Solon deliberately made me ill just to get hold of this Elixir?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Mind you, he made you better again.’

‘So what are we going to do about it?’

‘Nothing.’

‘But he tricked you!’

‘Out of a bottle of Elixir? He’s welcome to it. Who cares if he re-animates a couple more corpses?’

‘He might have killed me!’

‘But he didn’t.’

‘What would you have done if he had, Doctor?’

‘Killed him, probably.’

With a shock, Peri saw that he meant it.

‘Can’t we at least report him to that Galactic Medical Association?’

‘No proof – especially now that you’re well again.’

‘There are the injection marks.’

‘They don’t prove anything, Peri. Solon could produce a hundred good reasons for giving you injections.’

‘So he just gets away with it?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘Who cares? How many times must I tell you, Peri? All I want is to get you better and get away from here before anything else happens. As long as he leaves us alone, Solon can muck about with dead bodies as much as he likes.

And Commander Hawken’s ready to let us go. He’ll be glad to be rid of us, he’s got his hands full with this peace conference.’

‘What peace conference?’

‘They’re holding an intergalactic peace conference here, any day now.’ The Doctor stood up. ‘Get some more rest, Peri. I want you up and about in a day or two, then we can be off.’

‘You’d better get some rest too, Doctor, you look beat.

Thanks for looking out for me.’

He looked down at her and smiled. ‘I got you into all this, didn’t I? The least I can do is get you out again – in one piece!’

Solon sat in his office, a broad smile on his face, gloating over the phial – the full phial – of Elixir of Life on the desk before him.

Drago stood by the desk, looking at Solon with admiring astonishment.

‘But Surgeon-General, how...’

‘Simple. I brought an old phial with me, switched phials –

and gave the girl a massive injection of the antidote under cover of giving her the Elixir. And if you didn't see me, Drago, I'm damned sure Smith didn't!

'Wonderful,' said Drago. He looked at the little stone phial.

'But Surgeon-General, if I may ask...'

'Well?'

'There is so little of the Elixir, enough for a handful of experiments, no more. It will be hard to obtain a further supply.'

'I may have no need of a further supply,' said Solon arrogantly. 'If I can produce three or four fully animated subjects, I can dissect them and learn how to repeat the process *without* the Elixir.'

'If you say so, Surgeon-General,' said Drago dubiously.

'Still sounds like an idiotic scheme to me,' said a cheerful voice.

The Doctor was standing in the doorway.

Instinctively Solon reached out to grab the Elixir.

'You needn't bother,' snapped the Doctor. 'I worked out your little scheme some time ago.' He marched over to the desk and stared menacingly down at Solon.

'I am angry, extremely angry, that Miss Brown's health was put at risk. Don't you know the physician's chief law, Solon?

"First, do no harm."

Solon flinched from the quiet fury in the Doctor's voice, but managed to rally.

'Your friend ruined an important experiment by her interference. Now, indirectly, she has made a contribution to the success of others. Honours even, surely?'

'What would you know about honour?' said the Doctor, withering scorn in his voice. 'I came to tell you both this,' he went on. 'Miss Brown and I will be leaving in a day or so. If anything happens to endanger her health, or mine, in the intervening time, the results will hazard your joint healths even more. Fatally so, in fact. As an old acquaintance of mine called Adolf used to say, "My patience is

exhausted.” He started to leave and then paused. ‘Oh, and you can forget about convenient accidents or mysterious relapses. I’ve left a sealed envelope with Commander Hawken, containing a full account of your recent activities – to be opened in the event of anything happening to either of us.’

‘Wild accusations without an atom of proof,’ sneered Solon.

‘Enough to justify an investigation, though – especially if Peri and I are both dead. Commander Hawken can be very thorough. Do you really think you could stand up to one of his interrogations, Solon? And what about Drago here? I should think he’d crack pretty quickly, wouldn’t you?’

The Doctor left, leaving a stunned and silent audience behind him.

Suddenly Drago realised that Solon was studying him thoughtfully.

‘I’d never betray you, Surgeon-General, never,’ he stammered.

‘Of course you wouldn’t, my dear Drago,’ said Solon. He rose and put a paternal hand on Drago’s quivering shoulder.

‘Don’t give it another thought.’

‘That should hold the swine,’ thought the Doctor as he crossed an open courtyard on the way back to his quarters. ‘For a day or two anyway. I must write that letter to Hawken when I’ve had some sleep... I must get this coat and these boots back to him...’

I’d better get Peri out of here very soon. She can convalesce in the TARDIS if necessary. Or I could take her somewhere... But then, that’s how all this business started. There must be some safe and peaceful places in the cosmos. Trouble is, I never seem to be able to find them... I just hope nothing else happens before we leave...’

The Doctor’s musings were interrupted by the rumble of retro-rockets. He looked up to see a small fleet of spaceships, dropping one by one out of the morning sky and touching down in the little spaceport behind the castle.

The delegates to the peace conference had arrived.

Chapter Ten

Reception

‘All I ask is a few minutes’ access to my blue box,’ said the Doctor. ‘My young friend here is well enough to get up and she needs fresh clothes.’

Peri smiled seductively at the young security guard. ‘Just for a few minutes,’ she pleaded. ‘My entire wardrobe’s in there and as you can see, I’ve got nothing to wear...’ She pulled her thin hospital nightgown and robe more tightly around her and sighed deeply.

The sentry was tempted, in more ways than one, but he was also terrified of Commander Hawken. ‘I’m sorry, the blue box is under strict security embargo. No access without written authorisation from the Commander. If you could go and see him and get permission...’

‘I’ve tried to see him,’ said the Doctor. ‘He’s completely tied up with the arrangements for this wretched conference. He won’t be free until tomorrow, possibly not even then.’ He nodded towards the flimsily clad Peri. ‘As you can see, the situation is urgent.’

The sentry, who had been studying the situation very closely, said, ‘If I could make a suggestion, sir?’

‘Well?’

‘There’s a commissary for the hospital staff, over in the West Tower. The young lady could probably get most of what she needs over there. If you’ve got currency or credit.. ’

‘Both,’ said the Doctor. ‘Thank you, guard. I shall commend your conscientiousness to Commander Hawken.’

As they walked away down the corridor, Peri said, ‘Well, it was a cunning plan – but it didn’t quite work!’

The Doctor sighed. ‘The aggravating thing is, Hawken probably would let us get to the TARDIS. I think he’d even let us leave officially. But he’s so tied up in this conference I can’t get hold of him.’

‘Never mind,’ said Peri. ‘Always a silver lining.’

‘Such as?’

‘Such as shopping! When did I last get a chance to shop?’

She looked around with interest as they made their way over to the West Tower, amazed at the sheer size of the Castle, which, as she

pointed out, was largely new to her.

‘Apart from my room, a bit of corridor and the traditional mad scientist’s laboratory, I’ve hardly seen the place. It’s enormous – and this weird mixture of ancient and modern...’

‘It started life as a warlord’s castle with built-on additions,’

said the Doctor. ‘More like a small city really, with buildings huddled round the castle for safety. It was derelict for a while.

Then the soldiers and the medics took over, converting and making additions as they went along. They’ve even got their own hydrogen reactor now. And there’s a military section wing I’ve never even seen. Don’t want to either.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’ve never got on all that well with soldiers, Peri. Except for the Brigadier, of course, and good old Benton...’

By way of endless stone corridors, staircases and walkways, they made their way over to the West Tower. Occasionally they crossed stone-flagged courtyards, and Peri shivered in the clear cold mountain air.

The commissary turned out to be a vast stone chamber lined with counters and shelves. It had a sprinkling of customers, some civilian, some military, and, in a basic, no-frills kind of way, stocked pretty well everything.

‘Not exactly Harrods,’ said Peri. ‘More like Woolworths. But it’ll have to do. Have you got any money, Doctor?’

The Doctor produced a square of iridescent plastic.

‘Intergalactic Platinum. The sky’s the limit, Peri.’

He smiled at the delighted look on her face.

‘After all she’s been through, she deserves a bit of pleasure,’

he thought.

‘That’ll do very nicely,’ said Peri. ‘Come on, Doctor, let’s go!’

In the Governor’s study, Lord Delmar and Commander Hawken were discussing the evening’s reception.

‘Got an uneasy feeling about this conference,’ grumbled Delmar.

‘Why is that, my lord?’

‘You’ve seen the delegates, haven’t you? As nasty-looking a bunch of thugs as I’ve ever encountered.’

‘Not a very sophisticated group, I agree, my lord. But since they all come from frontier planets...’

‘And why are there so many of them?’ demanded Delmar.

‘There are only about half a dozen delegates. But they’ve all brought bodyguards, personal secretaries, military aides, batmen and so on. Makes a total group of about thirty.’

It was interesting, thought Hawken, that the secretaries, aides and batmen looked every bit as tough as the bodyguards.

‘Don’t worry, my lord,’ he went on. ‘It’s still a pretty small force, and I’m keeping an eye on them. Only the actual delegates are invited to the reception, of course. I’ve got the guest list here.’

Lord Delmar studied the list. ‘Going to be a pretty dull evening.’

‘What makes you say that, my lord?’

‘These delegates don’t look like brilliant conversationalists.

Expect they communicate in low grunts.’

‘You’re probably right, my lord. Though this General of theirs, Rombusi, seems a pretty superior type. And there are always our own people, of course.’

Delmar sniffed. ‘Bunch of soldiers and doctors all talking shop. Won’t make for a very scintillating evening.’

Hawken thought for a moment. ‘Why not ask Smith, our visitor? I’m turning him loose soon. You really ought to meet him before he goes. Charming fellow. And his friend Miss –

unpronounceable Brown might be well enough to come.

Apparently she’s even more charming.’

‘Why not?’ said Delmar. ‘Add ’em to the guest list.’

In the quarters assigned to the delegates, the General was addressing his staff officers. 'I want you all on your best behaviour tonight. Best uniforms and everyone's to wash whether he needs it or not. Eat with the implements provided, and keep your hands off the serving staff, they're not on the menu.' The General's staff officers were as villainous-looking a group of hard men as you could find in the galaxy. They glared mutinously, but nobody protested. Arguing with the General counted as mutiny.

It carried the death penalty.

'Remember why we're here,' said the General. 'Remember what is at stake. It's important, at least for a time, that we retain the goodwill of the people you'll meet tonight. I want you all to be model guests...'

The delegates left, all except one, a tall, black-cloaked figure with a white face and burning red eyes. His name was Grimoire, and he was the nearest thing the General had to a friend.

Perhaps it was because Grimoire was the only man – if man was the word – who wasn't afraid of him.

In his own way, Grimoire was devoted to the General, although he showed it, as sometimes happens, by needling him constantly.

'You really think you can get away with taking those apes to a formal reception?'

'They've got to put in a token appearance,' said the General firmly. 'We're a peace conference, a conference has to have delegates. You're in charge, Grimoire. Anyone gives any trouble, bustle them out. I know I can rely on you.'

As indeed he could.

Grimoire had been having a hard time before the General took him on his staff. He was an experienced mercenary, but he had certain limitations, especially during the hours of daylight.

After dark, however, he was unequalled. And he asked for little...

Loaded down with a variety of parcels in different shapes and sizes, the Doctor and Peri staggered into her room. Peri had exchanged her dressing-gown and robes for a well-cut grey trouser-suit.

Dropping his armful of burdens on the bed, the Doctor perched on the

end of it and mopped his brow.

‘I have undergone many terrifying experiences during my travels through space and time, Peri – but shopping with you is undoubtedly the most unnerving.’

Peri, exhausted but happy, set about unwrapping and sorting her acquisitions.

‘You just don’t understand shopping, Doctor. It’s a girl thing.’

‘Why did you have to buy three evening dresses?’ he protested. ‘And why did you insist on my buying that dress suit?’

We’re leaving in a day or so and I haven’t heard of any festivities.’

‘That’s where you’re wrong. One of the women in the commissary was buying a new gown for the reception.’

‘What reception?’

‘There’s a reception tonight for the peace conference delegates.’

‘Well, we’re not invited.’

Peri spotted an ornate envelope on her bedside table, grabbed it and ripped it open. ‘Oh yes we are – at least I am.

“Lord Delmar, Governor of the Hospice of Karn, requests the pleasure...” There’ll be one of these waiting for you in your rooms, Doctor.’

‘Blast! What time’s this reception?’

‘Six o’clock.’ Peri glanced at her newly acquired watch and shrieked. ‘It’s already gone three!’

‘Plenty of time then.’

‘Less than three hours to get ready? Plenty of time?’ Peri sorted through the parcels until she found the one containing the Doctor’s dress suit and thrust it into his arms. ‘There you are then, off you go. Pick me up here at a quarter to six and don’t be late!’

She hustled him out of the room.

The reception was well under way by the time the Doctor and Peri

arrived. (They were a little late because Peri had changed her mind three times about which dress to wear.) The reception was held in a large, ornately furnished room in Lord Delmar's quarters. There were glittering chandeliers, and servants with trays of exotic drinks and delicacies. There were scattered little groups of people, drinking and nibbling and making laborious conversation.

There was even a major-domo to announce the guests.

'Mr John Smith and Miss Perpugilliam Brown,' he boomed.

Peri glanced at the Doctor as they went inside.

'*Mr* John Smith? What happened to the Doctor bit?'

'We're in a hospital,' the Doctor reminded her. 'It might give people the wrong idea. I don't want people telling me their digestive problems over the canapés and champagne.'

'There's more to it than that, isn't there?'

'Let's just say I've good reasons for remaining incognito.'

They moved to the centre of the room, where Lord Delmar, splendid in frock coat, knee-breeches and buckled shoes, was waiting to greet them.

His eyes lit up at the sight of Peri in her low-cut red gown.

Beside her was the Doctor, looking neat and sleek in his black dress suit.

Peri curtsayed and the Doctor bowed.

'Charmed, charmed,' said Lord Delmar. He studied Peri's bare shoulders and arms with appreciation. 'You certainly seem restored to full health, young lady. Another success for our esteemed Doctor Solon.'

Solon, who was standing amidst a worshipping little group of junior doctors nearby, came towards them at the mention of his name.

'It was a privilege,' he murmured. 'I am only too happy to have been of service.'

'I couldn't possibly tell you all that Doctor Solon has done for me,' said Peri. 'I only wish I could repay him as he deserves.'

The sweetness of her words contrasted strangely with the fury in her eyes, and Solon moved away as a waitress came over with drinks and another with delicacies.

Lord Delmar registered the exchange. 'Your young friend doesn't seem too fond of Doctor Solon, Mr Smith. A little friction, perhaps?'

'Doctor Solon's surgical skills are undeniable,' said the Doctor. 'His bedside manner leaves something to be desired.'

'Hanky-panky,' thought Delmar instantly. There had been rumours about Solon and female patients before. Solon's eminence gave him a certain latitude, but all the same... He decided to have a word with Commander Hawken.

Hawken himself came over, looking, as usual, as if he ought to be swinging from the rafters. The Doctor introduced him, and Hawken's suave charm soon made Peri forget his intimidating appearance.

Hawken seemed quite taken with Peri and it was easy to see why. The Doctor surveyed the room. Doctors and army officers and their wives, hospital administrators, nursing staff, all dressed in their sober best. In her scarlet gown Peri stood out like an orchid in a cabbage patch.

Soon young officers and young doctors swarmed around her. The Doctor looked on amused, and made solemn conversation with a retired colonel and a senior administrator.

Then he excused himself, scooped two glasses of champagne from a passing tray and detached Peri from a protesting group of her admirers.

They found a quiet corner and stood watching the crowd.

'I thought you might like a break,' he said. 'How's it going?'

'Pretty well,' said Peri. 'Three dates, two propositions and a proposal.'

'I'm not surprised,' said the Doctor surveying her thoughtfully. 'Maybe you should have worn the high-necked, dove-grey number after all.'

'You mustn't begrudge a girl her little triumphs,' said Peri. 'I think I might stay on here. Marry Lord Delmar and become First Lady of Karn.'

'Why settle for a mere lord?' said the Doctor absently. 'Why not a

king?’ He looked round the room. ‘Notice who’s missing, Peri?’

‘No, who? I thought everybody who was anybody was here.’

‘All except the guest of honour – the General and his accompanying peace delegates.’

‘Maybe he’s just being fashionably late,’ suggested Peri.

‘Maybe – or perhaps he wants to make a big entrance.’

At that moment there was a mild commotion as a gaudily uniformed group appeared at the door. Unable to grasp the string of barbaric-sounding names hissed, snarled and grunted at him, the major-domo compromised.

‘General Rombusi,’ he boomed. ‘And party!’

One man strode into the room, the others at his heels like a pack of savage dogs. He wasn’t a big man, in fact he was under medium height, but his presence seemed to fill the room. He wore a uniform of scarlet and gold and he was, thought Peri, quite incredibly handsome, with the face of a Greek god, or a Roman emperor.

He scanned the room with casual arrogance and suddenly his eyes met the Doctor’s. Their glances clashed like two swords in the first deadly seconds of a duel – and their minds touched.

The Doctor sensed a powerful mind – shielded by impregnable barriers.

Staring hard at the Doctor, the General sensed exactly the same.

For a moment time was frozen...

Chapter Eleven

Encounter

It was an extraordinary moment – but it was just a moment, no more. Scarcely breaking stride, the General strode across the room to Lord Delmar and made a sweeping bow. Commander Hawken was at Delmar’s side.

‘My lord, allow me to present General Rombusi and his – associates.’

Gracefully, Lord Delmar returned the General's bow.

The associates, meanwhile, were staring around the room with the pleased anticipation of wolves who unexpectedly find themselves in a sheepfold.

The General snapped his fingers and they bowed, clumsily, like dancing bears performing a new trick, retreating immediately into the background.

'This is a great honour, my lord,' said the General. 'Your kindness and generosity alone have made our conference possible. On behalf of the peace-loving peoples of the galaxy, I offer my humble thanks.'

His voice was deep and mellow, and although it wasn't loud, every word carried distinctly around the room.

'The honour is mine, General,' said Lord Delmar. 'It is a privilege to aid such a noble cause.' But he couldn't help flicking a brief sceptical glance at the associates.

'I must ask your indulgence for my friends,' said the General.

'They are humble peasants, simple men, unused to such distinguished company. But they are all leaders on their own primitive planets, and their hearts are in the right place. They have the vision to see that, humble as it is, the peaceful federation we plan can be a force for good in a war-torn galaxy.'

If we, unimportant as we are, can take the first faltering steps on the path to peace, other and mightier powers may follow.'

'It's a speech,' thought Peri. 'A political speech – a very effective one too.' And, indeed, as the General's words spread around the room, they were greeted with spontaneous applause.

The General bowed modestly.

'And what about you, General?' asked Commander Hawken.

'If I may say so, you don't strike me as the humble peasant leader of a primitive community.'

The General laughed, acknowledging the hit. 'I must wear more straw in my hair! No, I was – I am – an immigrant to the planet Darkeen, which I now have the honour to represent.'

After a not unsuccessful career in the political life of my home planet, I retired to seek a more simple life. I bought myself a plantation on Darkeen and settled down to be a melon farmer.'

'But it didn't last?'

The General gave a rueful smile. 'I'm afraid not, Commander. The planet was fertile, potentially rich and prosperous, but its affairs were in chaos, its economy in ruins. It was engaged in a series of trade wars with neighbouring planets –

trade wars that inevitably turned into shooting wars. Something had to be done.'

'And you did it?'

'You might say so. I became involved in local politics – and eventually in politics at planetary level. I was able to negotiate trade agreements, peace treaties... One thing led to another – and here we are!'

Lord Delmar's shrewd old eyes were studying him thoughtfully. 'It's a drug, isn't it, General? A hard one to give up.' 'What is, my lord?'

'Power.'

'Power?' said the General scornfully. 'I assure you, my lord, I had all the power anyone could want before I set foot on Darkeen. I renounced it voluntarily. I found another drug, even more powerful than power.' He paused dramatically. 'Service!'

Another ripple of applause.

The General smiled deprecatingly. 'Forgive me. I didn't come here to make speeches about my own petty concerns.

They must seem trivial indeed to those who are responsible for such a great institution as the Hospice of Karn. I trust your affairs are prospering? And what of this mysterious Sisterhood?

Are they as powerful as legend would have us believe? Their fame has reached even such remote planets as Darkeen... Is it not strange that the Sisterhood and the Hospice should occupy the same planet?'

'Not at all,' said Lord Delmar. 'One stems from the other.

Over the years, the planet Karn acquired a strange reputation as a place of healing. An intergalactic medical association set up a hospice

here, feeling that there must be something beneficial in the air or the waters.' He smiled. 'They soon discovered that it was not the climate but the Elixir that was producing miracle cures! They reached an accommodation with the Sisterhood, and the two institutions flourished together.'

'Fascinating,' said the General. 'Absolutely fascinating!'

He went on talking to Delmar and Hawken in low, deferential tones. Gradually the normal buzz of conversation filled the room. It was easy to guess what, or rather who, everyone was talking about.

Peri turned to the Doctor. 'Talk about charisma! Who is he?'

'I don't know,' said the Doctor slowly.

'The way he looked at you when he came in I thought you knew each other.'

'I thought so myself. Now I'm not so sure.'

Peri studied the Doctor's face. He was staring into space. 'Is he another Time Lord?' she asked.

'Perhaps.'

'I thought you guys had ways of recognising each other?'

'We do. There's a brief mind-touch, just a kind of courtesy.

It's rude to probe, but there's always a moment of acknowledgement.'

'And that didn't happen this time?'

'Our minds touched,' said the Doctor slowly. 'But his was shielded – barred. So I shielded mine.'

'So you're none the wiser?'

'Not really. He's hiding something – hiding a great deal. But he's someone very powerful, very important. I'd like to know what he's doing on Karn.'

'Arranging a peace conference, surely?'

The Doctor nodded towards the General's companions.

‘With that lot? Just look at them.’

Peri looked. Making no attempt to mingle, the associates were standing in a corner, backs to the wall, scanning the room, and methodically emptying any food or drinks tray that came within range.

Peri studied the group. They were all dressed in tattered finery, furs and leather and gleaming steel buckles and breastplates. They were all human, or at least humanoid, though of wildly differing physical types. One was massive and bearlike, one squat, almost a dwarf. One was tall, thin and gaunt, another grossly fat with wobbling chins. The fifth member of the group was the nearest to normal, and the most frightening, a tall, thin man in black with a white face and cold, dead eyes.

They were all different – yet they all had something in common.

‘They’ve all got the Look,’ said Peri.

The Doctor looked mildly puzzled. ‘What look is that?’

Peri’s mind went back to her early days on Earth.

‘It’s something you see in American cities – in the dangerous parts. Places where everyone who looks at you seems to be thinking, “Do I mug this one, or that one? Who’s carrying the most cash, who’ll put up the biggest fight? Who’ll fall for a con, or a sob story?”’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Predators, Peri. You’re describing predators. That’s what these people are. Gaztaks.’

‘Gaztaks?’

‘Space pirates. So, what’s a man like the General doing with a bunch like that?’ The Doctor answered his own question.

‘Starting at the bottom, that’s what!’

‘Why would he do that?’ asked Peri. ‘He said he had power on his own planet and gave it up.’

‘I think that was a half-truth. He had power all right, but he didn’t give it up. It was probably taken from him.’

‘So now he’s making a comeback?’

‘Exactly. And he’s using the scum of the galaxy because that’s all that’s available to him.’

Peri looked dubious. ‘That’s a pretty sizeable piece of guesswork – based on absolutely no evidence.’

‘It’s not a matter of guesswork,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s a process of deduction – or rather, induction. The thing is, what’s he up to? That’s what we’ve got to find out!’

‘Doctor, we’re leaving, remember? Possibly tomorrow.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said the Doctor guiltily. ‘I’ll have a quiet word with Hawken before we go. Don’t worry, I’m not going to get involved...’

‘You, get involved?’ said Peri. ‘In some dangerous affair that’s none of our business? Of course not!’

‘Now, Peri,’ said the Doctor, and then broke off.

Commander Hawken and the General were coming across the room towards them.

‘The General has asked to be introduced,’ said Hawken.

‘General, may I introduce Miss – Miss Brown, a patient of the Hospice, soon to be leaving us and her –’ he stopped, raising an eyebrow at the Doctor.

‘Her guardian,’ said the Doctor.

‘– her guardian, Mr John Smith. I’ll leave you together.’

As Hawken moved away, the General nodded briefly to the Doctor and gave Peri a long and comprehensive look. ‘You look to be in excellent health to me, Miss Brown. An outstanding physical specimen if I may say so.’

A warm and friendly smile robbed the compliment of offence. ‘Thank you, General,’ said Peri demurely. ‘I’m almost better now. I hope to be leaving soon.’

‘I am desolated,’ said the General. ‘I’d hoped to improve our acquaintance very considerably – subject to your guardian’s approval, of course.’

Peri had the strangest feeling that, despite the flow of extravagant

compliments, it was the Doctor who was really engaging the General's attention.

The General turned to the Doctor now. 'And what do you do in life, Mr Smith?'

'I travel – and I observe.'

'Admirable. One could occupy many lives in such a pursuit.

Observation is harmless and commendable. It is interference which is so dangerous.' The General turned to Peri. 'If you will forgive me, I must pay some attention to my colleagues. They're a little uneasy here – fish out of water, you know. . '

'Tigers out of the jungle?' suggested the Doctor.

The General smiled. 'If they are tigers, I have tamed them, Mr Smith.'

He seized a champagne glass from a passing tray and raised it to Peri.

'To our future acquaintance, Miss Brown.'

He drained the glass and strode away. Almost regretfully, Peri watched him go. There was something very attractive about the General.

She turned back to the Doctor who was also staring after the General.

'What were all those enigmatic exchanges about observation and interference?'

'He was warning me off. He didn't expect to find a fellow Time Lord here, and he doesn't like it.'

'So he is a Time Lord, then?'

'Oh, I think so, Peri. A mysterious renegade Time Lord with many secrets to hide.'

Peri grinned. 'Who does that remind me of?'

'We're two of a kind in that way,' admitted the Doctor. 'But in all other ways we're completely different.'

Which was true enough, thought Peri. She knew that her mild-mannered Doctor had unexpected resources. But he had none of the

arrogance, the strength and drive that made the General so appealing.

The Doctor looked across the room and saw the General and Solon talking quietly in a secluded corner. He wondered what they could have in common.

‘You see, Solon,’ said the General. ‘I have come, just as I promised.’

‘At last,’ whispered Solon. ‘It seems an age since we met and you first told me of your great plan.’

They had met at an intergalactic medical conference of which the General, in another role and under another name, had been a patron. Solon, confused, uncertain and insanely ambitious, had instantly fallen under his spell.

‘I have been labouring in your service,’ Solon went on.

The General strove to remember what mad scheme Solon had proposed to him. ‘And how goes your project?’

‘Slowly,’ admitted Solon. ‘There are many hindrances in my way. But I have recently obtained a fresh supply of Elixir, and my hopes are high. By the time you return in triumph I hope to be of real help. An invincible army, unkillable because they are already dead!’

The General smiled indulgently. ‘When I return in triumph, old friend, I hope to need no help. But continue with your project. Science must be served, and there are always more galaxies to conquer...’

He put a friendly hand on Solon’s shoulder and moved back towards his colleagues, leaving Solon gazing worshipfully after him.

One of the General’s greatest gifts was his power of attracting useful devotees and binding them to his cause. Solon, for one, would have died for him.

The General and his associates had left, and the reception crowd was thinning out when Commander Hawken appeared at the Doctor’s side.

‘So, what do you make of our General?’

‘A very impressive character,’ said the Doctor. ‘A man of great powers. The question is, what does he intend to use them for?’ ‘In the cause of peace, so he says.’

‘Exactly,’ said the Doctor. ‘So he says.’

‘You don’t believe him?’

‘I’m not sure that I do.’

‘Why not?’ asked Peri.

The Doctor didn’t feel that he could reveal the most important reason in front of Hawken – his conviction that the General was a renegade Time Lord. (Another renegade Time Lord, he thought wryly.) But there were reasons enough without that one.

‘First the General himself. There’s an enormous amount of ego under all that charm, a tremendous vanity. All that stuff about abandoning power and taking up service just didn’t ring true.’

‘I quite agree,’ said Hawken. ‘Go on.’

‘This whole peace conference business is odd. Why should a handful of primitive planets suddenly decide to form an alliance

– and why should someone like the General care enough about it to help them? Finally, his fellow delegates. They just don’t strike me as really peace-loving types.’

Hawken smiled. ‘So to sum up...’

‘He’s a dangerous customer with some very dubious friends, and he’s up to no good.’

‘My own conclusions exactly. I’d like to pack him off back to where he came from, but it’s too late for that.’

‘Why?’

‘The Governor won’t have it. Bad public relations.’

‘So what are you going to do?’

‘What any decent, upright security man would do – I’m going to bug his peace conference.’

Chapter Twelve

Listening

Surrounded by a complicated lash-up of electronic equipment, the Doctor and Commander Hawken were sitting in the windowless

communications room of Hawken's security HQ.

It had been, Hawken explained, a simple matter to bug the conference.

'They're holding it in the small conference room in the barracks section. The place is bugged already, so it was only a matter of checking over the equipment. We did that yesterday.'

He turned to the com-tech at the controls. 'Everything ready?'

'Ready, sir.'

'Then why can't we hear anything?'

'They're not actually due to start for another hour, sir. I thought we'd better be ready early.'

'Good thinking,' said Hawken. 'What do you want to do, Smith, hang on or come back later?'

'I may as well stay. I imagine the General will arrive last, and there may well be some preliminary talk while the others are waiting. That can often be more revealing than the formal proceedings.'

They settled down to wait.

'By the way,' asked the Doctor casually. 'Are we free to leave yet?'

'Tomorrow,' said Hawken. 'I'll get the Governor to sign your passes. You can even take your precious blue box with you.'

'I shall certainly do that,' said the Doctor.

'How will you travel?' asked Hawken. 'There are ships coming and going constantly, but a lot of them are military. I might be able to arrange a lift for you if you tell me where you want to go.'

'Don't trouble yourself,' said the Doctor hurriedly. 'I'm sure I can make some suitable arrangement...'

Peri strolled across the great stone-flagged courtyard on her way to the commissary. She was wearing a plain white linen day dress, one of her recent purchases. She thought she looked rather well in it. Now, armed with a bundle of credits thrust on her by the Doctor, she was on her way to do yet more shopping.

Despite this happy situation, she was feeling faintly aggrieved. The Doctor, who had joined her for breakfast, had flatly refused to let her attend the bugging session.

‘I just don’t think Hawken would stand for it, Peri. I had a job to persuade him to let *me* come, and he’s got a rather old-fashioned attitude to women.’

‘He’s not the only one,’ grumbled Peri.

The Doctor took a bundle of notes from his pocket. ‘Here, take these. I drew some local credits when I paid for your last purchases. There should be enough there for anything you didn’t buy first time round!’

‘In other words, go away and play and don’t bother the menfolk,’ thought Peri as she walked across the courtyard.

There was a fountain in the middle of the courtyard and a stone bench beside it. Peri sat down for a moment, enjoying the crisp, cool air and the morning sunshine.

She began thinking about last night’s reception and, inevitably, about the General. The Doctor, she thought, had been rather hard on him. What if he was a renegade Time Lord?

So was the Doctor, by his own admission, and he’d never used his undoubted powers for evil.

For all they knew, the General’s reasons for rejecting the Time Lords might be as honourable as the Doctor’s had been.

Was there, she wondered, an element of jealousy in the Doctor’s judgement? A resentment of a personality so much more powerful than his own?

She found herself picturing the General, the lithe, compact body, the cat-like grace with which he’d moved across the crowded room, effortlessly dominating those around him. She saw the noble head with its classically handsome features, the fierce black eyes that had softened when they gazed into her own. And the voice! That deep mellow voice which sent shivers through a girl’s body.

As if conjured up by her own imaginings, she heard that voice ringing across the courtyard. ‘Miss Brown! What an unexpected pleasure.’

She looked up and saw the General crossing the courtyard towards

her. He wore a uniform of scarlet and gold, only slightly less ornate than the one he'd worn last night. There was a tough-looking, grey-uniformed officer at his heels.

He came over and stood looking down at her, giving her that same warm smile. 'I very much wanted to see you again, Miss Brown. I dared not hope that it would be so soon. May I trespass upon your time for a few minutes?'

'I've got plenty of time,' said Peri. 'But surely you haven't?'

Your peace conference –'

'The conference the Doctor is waiting to bug,' she thought guiltily.

'The conference can wait,' said the General simply. He turned to the officer. 'Tell the others I shall be late.'

It was obvious that the officer would have liked to object. It was equally obvious that he didn't dare. He clicked his heels and marched away.

'It's not every girl who's had a peace conference postponed for her,' thought Peri. Out loud she said, 'General, you mustn't'

...' The General waved away her objections and sat down beside her. 'Miss Brown –' He broke off. 'Must I call you that?'

Commander Hawken didn't give your forename when he introduced us.'

Peri smiled. 'That's because he can't pronounce it! It's Perpugilliam – Peri for short.'

'Peri,' said the General softly. 'A name for a flower.' He took her hand.

(A fast worker,' thought Peri, but she didn't withdraw her hand.)

'I am sorry we didn't have time to talk last night,' said the General. 'I very much wanted to, but the pressures of the occasion... It was important that I make a good impression here.'

'You certainly did that,' said Peri. 'Swept them all off their feet.'

'All?' said the General softly. He pressed her hand. 'I was afraid you were leaving today, that I would never see you again.'

When do you go?’

‘Not today,’ said Peri. ‘Tomorrow, perhaps, or the day after.’

Conscious that things were racing ahead a bit, she gently withdrew her hand.

‘I too must leave here soon,’ said the General. ‘We must use what time we have. Will you dine with me tonight?’

Peri hesitated.

‘With your guardian’s permission, of course,’ said the General. ‘Of course, if he forbids you –’

That did it.

‘He’s my travelling companion, not my guardian – and he has no authority to forbid me to do anything. Thank you, I should be delighted.’

The General took her hand again and kissed it. ‘This evening, then – I shall send an escort for you. Wear the red dress.’ He rose, bowed and strode away.

Peri stayed sitting by the fountain in something of a daze.

Vaguely she wondered if she ought to have warned the General that his peace conference was bugged. But that would be to betray the Doctor. Besides, if the General was innocent, and she was sure now that he was, the bugging would reveal nothing to his discredit. It might even relieve the Doctor’s ridiculous suspicions.

She sat there for some time, torn between pleasurable anticipation and apprehension. In spite of what she’d said to the General, she couldn’t help wondering what the Doctor was going to say...

The Doctor and Commander Hawken were listening with a kind of bored impatience to footsteps, the scraping of chairs and a few scraps of desultory conversation as the delegates arrived in the conference room.

‘That makes all of them by my reckoning,’ said the Doctor.

‘All but the General, that is.’

As if to confirm his words, a voice growled, ‘Well, we’re all here. How

much longer's the General gonna be?'

'Sounds as if he's got his hands full by all accounts,' said another voice. 'Probably literally if I know him; he always was a fast worker.'

'Well, can't blame him,' said the first voice tolerantly. 'She's a hot little piece right enough. Maybe he'll pass her round when he's done with her, he does that sometimes.'

There was a burst of coarse laughter, followed by some even coarser remarks. Idly the Doctor wondered what unfortunate girl was the subject of the General's attentions. Some kitchen maid probably...

Suddenly there was dead silence, followed by the General's voice.

'My apologies for the delay, gentlemen, I've been detained – most delightfully detained, I might add.'

'So we heard,' said a voice.

The laughter was cut short as the General spoke again.

'Well, let us begin. First item on the agenda.. '

Suddenly a crackling sound filled the air, drowning out all speech.

Angrily Hawken swung round on the com-tech. 'The bloody equipment's broken down!'

'It can't have sir,' said the technician frantically. 'It was checked and re-checked this morning.'

The Doctor was listening intently to the sound.

'They're using a jammer,' he said. 'Blocking the channel with white noise. If you've got a triple-band frequency feedback oscillator we may be able to tune most of it out.'

Hawken glared at the technician. 'Well?'

Miserably the technician shook his head. 'Never heard of such a thing, sir.'

'Never mind,' said the Doctor. 'I'll build you one. Won't take long if you've got the parts. Where's your spares section? And I'll need an electronic connecting screwdriver.'

He went over to a nearby workbench, and the technician began producing pieces of equipment. Working with amazing speed the Doctor assembled an elaborate electronic contraption and plugged it into the bugging equipment. He adjusted dials and gradually the crackling faded and voices emerged.

‘Sylvana is the key, gentlemen,’ said the General. ‘It’s a springboard – and a bread basket. Once it’s in our hands, we can feed and supply our armies...’

The Doctor and Hawken listened, appalled, as the conference went on. Occasionally they lost reception, but the Doctor always managed to get it back eventually.

But even from the fragments they heard, the message was clear.

There was no talk of peace plans or trade treaties.

Instead the discussion concerned troop movements, arms supplies and the assembly of space fleets.

When the morning session closed, the Doctor and Hawken looked at each other.

‘I’m not sure what we’ve been listening to,’ said Hawken.

‘But it was no peace conference!’

‘It certainly wasn’t,’ said the Doctor. ‘It was a council of war.’

Chapter Thirteen

Raid

Peri was still sitting dreamily by the fountain when the Doctor hurried into the courtyard.

‘There you are, Peri. Finished your shopping?’

‘Not started,’ said Peri. ‘I got distracted. I thought you were busy bugging.’

‘Lunch break,’ explained the Doctor.

‘How’s it going?’

‘Very well,’ said the Doctor. ‘Or very badly. Depends how you look at

it.'

'Sorry?'

'The bugging itself is being pretty successful. There was some interference, but I managed to bypass most of it. The results are very worrying. The General isn't planning a peaceful alliance. He's planning to conquer the galaxy.'

Briefly the Doctor explained the results of the morning's eavesdropping.

Peri seemed reluctant to accept his conclusions. 'Are you sure about all this? You say yourself you only half-heard what was going on.'

'We heard enough,' said the Doctor grimly. 'There's still the afternoon session to come. We'll hear more then.'

'You'll hear what you expect to hear,' said Peri. 'You've already decided the General is guilty.'

The Doctor looked curiously at her. 'The evidence is more than sufficient, Peri. Anyway, I wanted to tell you I won't be free till much later. We need to hear the rest of the conference, then there'll be some kind of planning meeting with Commander Hawken.'

'Don't worry about me, Doctor. I've got a dinner date.'

'Who with?'

'With the General.'

'When did he ask you?'

'I met him on the way to the conference.'

'And where is this tryst to take place?'

'In his quarters, I suppose. He's sending an aide to fetch me.'

'No,' said the Doctor. As soon as the word was out of his mouth, he realised it was the worst possible thing he could have said. Peri looked at him coldly. 'I'm sorry?'

The Doctor was committed now. 'You can't possibly have dinner alone with the General, Peri. He's a dangerous criminal.'

‘You’ve no proof of that.’

‘There’s more than enough proof. If you’d heard what we heard this morning...’ Suddenly the Doctor remembered a snatch of dialogue. ‘I’ll give you a sample. When his henchmen were waiting for him to arrive one of them said, “How much longer’s the General gonna be?” Then someone answered, “Sounds as if he’s got his hands full by all accounts. Probably literally if I know him, he always was a fast worker.” The first one said, “Well, can’t blame him. She’s a hot little piece right enough. Maybe he’ll pass her round when he’s done with her, he does that sometimes.”’ He paused. ‘I didn’t realise at the time, but they were talking about you!’

‘So?’ said Peri defiantly. ‘Some of his associates have got dirty minds – and dirty mouths. What did the General say about me?’ ‘Only that he’d been detained,’ admitted the Doctor reluctantly. “‘Delightfully, detained”, to use his exact words.’

‘There you are then,’ said Peri. ‘Look, Doctor, it’s only a dinner date. He knows I’m leaving soon, maybe tomorrow. He just wants to say goodbye.’

‘No,’ said the Doctor again. ‘I can’t allow it.’

‘You can’t stop me,’ said Peri defiantly. ‘You’re not really my guardian, you know, we’re just travelling companions. And I’m not a child, I’m a grown woman. You’re just jealous. Just because you’ve never shown any –’ She broke off, confused, not sure what she’d wanted to say, certain that she shouldn’t say it.

She started again. ‘It’s just a dinner date, Doctor. We’ll meet for breakfast tomorrow, I’ll tell you all about it and then we’ll leave –

leave for wherever you like.’

‘*If* we leave together, we’ll leave for Earth,’ said the Doctor.

‘I’ll return you to your own time and we’ll say goodbye. Unless, of course, you decide to stay with your new friend.’

Peri stared at him appalled. ‘Doctor –’

‘The General and I are on opposite sides, Peri. You seem to have chosen yours.’

He turned and strode out of the courtyard.

Peri watched him go, her eyes filling with tears.

As he made his way back to the communications centre, the Doctor told himself he'd been a fool. He'd handled the situation badly. Of course a flat prohibition had provoked defiance. He should have reasoned with her, persuaded her. But would she have listened? She was a romantic and impressionable young girl, besotted by the General's formidable charm.

Incorrigibly reasonable, the Doctor told himself there was something in what Peri had said. She was a grown woman with a right to make her own decisions. He had no right to interfere. It would be wrong, morally wrong, against all his principles...

He strode into the communications room and found Hawken with a pile of sandwiches and a flask of coffee. He pushed both towards the Doctor.

'You're back early. Can't wait for the next instalment, eh?

Did you find your friend?'

'Yes,' said the Doctor grimly. 'Commander Hawken, I want you to do me a favour.'

'With the greatest of pleasure, my dear Smith. What can I do for you?'

'Arrest Peri,' said the Doctor.

Hawken stared at him in astonishment. 'Arrest her?

Whatever for?'

'Anything you like. Dropping litter. Loitering with intent.

Just so long as she's locked up and under guard between the end of the conference and breakfast time tomorrow.'

'Very well,' said Hawken. 'If you say so.' He summoned an aide and issued instructions.

Peri would never forgive him, thought the Doctor. But then, if she came to harm at the General's hands, he'd never forgive himself.

Sometimes you just have to choose between bad and worse.

They waited until the conference reconvened, Hawken puzzled and

the Doctor silent and abstracted.

The bugging soundtrack came to life again as the General reappeared and the conference resumed.

The afternoon session was much like the morning's. Plans of attack, troop movements, the assemblage of space fleets.

Possible allies, possible enemies...

It wasn't until the end of the conference that another subject came up – one that made the Doctor lean forward in eager attention.

‘And your promise, General,’ said a gruff voice. ‘Eternal life for all that serve you loyally. That still holds good?’

‘Of course,’ said the General. ‘The raid on the Temple of the Flame starts any moment now. We'll capture their stocks of Elixir and take them with us when we leave.’

‘There won't be enough for all,’ said another voice.

‘Of course not,’ said the General. ‘But there will be enough for those of us here. And what do you imagine the Sisterhood will do when their stocks of Elixir are gone?’ He answered his own question. ‘They'll manufacture more, of course, and stockpile it. And when we're ready we'll come back with an army and take that too. When we take over the planet, they'll manufacture the Elixir to our command.’

An aide rushed into the communications room.

‘Commander Hawken, soldiers from the peace conference spaceships have broken out of the castle. They killed the gate guards.’

‘On their way to the Temple of the Flame,’ said the Doctor.

Hawken nodded. ‘The General must have had troops hidden on his ships.’ He jumped up and turned to the aide. ‘Turn out the garrison. Take a squad and follow the General's raiding party and help the Sisterhood to defend the Temple. I'll take the rest and arrest the General and his entourage. If you'll excuse me, Smith, there's a lot to do.’

They rushed from the room and the Doctor was left alone.

He sat quite still for a moment, thinking hard. The General's men had a good start by now it was by no means certain that Hawken's men

would catch them up in time.

The Sisterhood, of course, was not without resources. If they were warned in time... The Doctor put his head in his hands and concentrated furiously. .

In the Temple, old Maren sat studying the sacred flame. As always it flickered and dimmed and then rose again. She watched it anxiously. Sometimes it seemed to her that it was weakening.

She glanced briefly at the recess beside the altar, where row upon row of sealed stone phials were safely stored. There was enough to meet demand for years to come. Yet if the Flame died, she and the Sisterhood would die. They had cheated death for so long that the thought of it was very terrible to them.

Something plucked at the edge of her consciousness. A demand, a message...

A warning!

Maren opened her mind and the thought-impulse hit her like a hammer blow.

‘ Danger – attack – defend yourself. ’

Somehow she recognised the mind-touch. ‘Smith,’ she thought. ‘The one who calls himself Smith.’

A strange, enigmatic character with many secrets. But in this instance, at least, someone to be trusted.

She rose and came out from behind the gates that shielded the flame.

‘Sisters! Form the circle.’

Obediently, black-robed figures gathered around her and the chanting began.

Slowly a vision formed in Maren’s mind.

A vision of grey-clad troops trudging along a mountain pass.

She raised her voice. ‘Concentrate, sisters, focus your minds.

Speak to the mountain, the mountain is our friend.. ’

The commander of the General's raiding party died a happy man.

He was a Gaztak mercenary called Spiros, veteran of many a bloody campaign. Like all professional soldiers, he liked things easy when possible, and this assignment was a killer's dream.

Raid some old temple and steal supplies of Elixir, the only opposition a parcel of women. That wasn't fighting, it was fun.

It was a pity the General had ordered that the women shouldn't be harmed – but where was the harm in a bit of friendly rape? They'd be doing them a favour. Just the young and pretty ones of course...

His mind on the pleasures ahead, Spiros didn't notice faint rumblings from high above. He noticed when the rumblings got louder and louder, but it was too late by then.

He looked up and saw a black-robed figure looking down at him. It was the last thing he saw before a sizeable chunk of the mountain fell upon him and his men, obliterating them completely.

Chapter Fourteen

Break-out

The Doctor raised his head and rubbed his eyes, his face haggard with the strain of concentration. He was pretty sure his warning had got through.

The mind-link with Maren wasn't established enough for a precise verbal message. But the basic concepts had got through all right. He'd felt the wonder and puzzlement in Maren's mind –

and the surge of fury when she realised the threat of attack.

He became aware of the rattle of blaster-fire from somewhere nearby.

'Peri!' he thought, and ran from the communications room.

Peri sat in her room feeling a kaleidoscope of conflicting emotions, her mood ranging from exultation to anger, from excitement to sheer misery.

Time and again she replayed the scene with the Doctor, sometimes feeling exultant and self-justified, sometimes repentant. She thought uneasily that having dinner alone with the General could be a very bad idea. It was the sort of thing her mother and her father – and her

stepfather – would have warned her against.

But the very thought produced a surge of indignation. The Doctor wasn't her parent and he had no right to issue orders as if he were. She could still feel the shock of the cold anger in his eyes. She remembered the contemptuous threat to dump her back on Earth, an unworthy companion...

For someone with the most romantic evening of her life ahead of her, thought Peri, she was having a pretty miserable time.

She became aware of the sound of distant blaster-fire and wondered vaguely what was going on. She felt far too miserable to worry about it. Besides, if there was any real danger the Doctor would come and warn her.

The Doctor...

The cycle of conflicting emotions started up all over again.

Peri heard footsteps pounding down the corridor and looked up to see the General standing in the doorway, a blaster in his hands. Behind him she saw one of his aides, the massive bearlike figure she'd seen at the reception.

'I'm afraid there's been an unexpected crisis, my dear,' said the General. 'I have to leave Karn immediately.'

Peri felt a sudden surge of relief. The General's departure resolved her dispute with the Doctor – with no loss of face on either side, and without hurting the General's feelings.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'It looks as if our dinner will have to be postponed.'

'Not a bit of it,' said the General. 'I realised events would overtake us, so I made preparations.'

'What do you mean?'

'We shall dine together as planned. Not in my somewhat inadequate quarters in Karn but in deep space – in the state room of my flagship, surrounded by myriad stars! What could be more romantic?'

'Forget it,' said Peri. 'I said I'd have dinner with you: I didn't agree to elope.'

‘This isn’t an elopement,’ said the General.

‘No? What is it then?’

‘An abduction. Your agreement is not required. Bring her along, Nardo, we’re losing time.’

The General turned and ran from the room and the aide advanced on Peri, arms outstretched.

She tried to dodge but he caught her by the arm with one bear-like paw, and tapped her, quite gently, under the chin with an enormous fist.

Peri slumped and Nardo caught her as she fell, throwing her over his shoulder with practised ease. Drawing his blaster with his free hand, he followed the General.

Running across a courtyard close to the Castle spaceport, the Doctor heard blaster-fire and the roar of departing spaceships.

Commander Hawken appeared with a squad of guards, heading in the same direction. The Doctor joined them.

‘There you are, Smith,’ said Hawken as they hurried across the courtyard. ‘I’ve had a message back from the squad I sent after the General’s raiding party.’

‘And?’

‘The raiders have vanished. No trace of them at all, and the pass leading to the Temple is blocked by some kind of landslide.’

The Doctor smiled grimly. Maren had used his warning to good effect.

‘What about the General?’

‘His troops have broken through to the spaceport. He had more men hidden on his ships and the two forces linked up.

Some ships have already started to take off.’

‘Let them.’

Hawken stared at him. ‘What?’

‘Have you heard the old Earth story about the soldier who caught a

Tartar warrior one dark night? He called out to his officer, "I've caught a Tartar, sir!" The officer shouted, "Bring him back to camp." And the soldier said, "I'm trying, sir, but the Tartar won't let me!"

'This is no time for fables, Smith,' snapped Hawken.

'My dear Commander, do you and your security guards really want the job of holding the General's troops captive? Especially since there seem to be almost as many of them as there are of you! No, let the rag, tag and bobtail go, we're well rid of them.

It's the General we want.'

'We may get him yet,' said Hawken. 'His spaceship's still here, and there are no reports of him boarding. He was seen heading away from the spaceport with one of his guards.'

They passed through another building and emerged onto the edge of the little spaceport. A running battle was taking place, and the air was loud with the thud of blaster-fire and the sharp crack of laser-rifles.

The last of the General's men were streaming from the adjoining barracks to their spaceships, under covering fire from the troops who'd been concealed inside them, and now formed a guard around each ship. Hawken's men were spread thinly – too thinly, thought the Doctor – around the perimeter of the spaceport, taking advantage of what cover they could find.

From time to time one of the fleeing men crumpled and fell, but by and large the retreat went on uninterrupted. The Doctor noticed that casualties were snatched up and carried off by their fleeing comrades. The General was leaving no evidence behind.

One of Hawken's lieutenants ran up and saluted. 'We're managing to contain them, sir, but that's about all we can do.

They're too strong and too well-organised.'

Hawken glanced at the Doctor. 'Containing them's good enough, Lieutenant. There are laser-cannon on those ships. If they can bring them to bear, they could reduce this place to rubble. Let them go.'

From time to time, one of the little fleet of ships, its compliment complete, would take its guard-party on board, draw up its landing-ramp and blast off. The General's troops were conducting a well-organised and orderly fighting retreat, one of the most difficult

military operations to carry out successfully. It was, thought the Doctor, a significant tribute to the General's training.

At last there was only one ship left on the field. It was smaller, sleeker and more modern than the ones that had left.

'That's the General's flagship,' said Hawken. 'If it's waiting, he must still be here.'

'Then capture it,' ordered the Doctor. 'Go on, man, you outnumber them now. If we can seize that ship, we can cut off the General's retreat. Once he's on board it'll be too late.'

'I command here, Smith,' growled Hawken.

The Doctor met his angry glare. 'Of course you do. So get on with it!'

Scowling, Hawken turned to the lieutenant and snapped out a string of orders.

The lieutenant relayed them into his wrist-com and the ring of security guards began closing in on the solitary spaceship.

From somewhere close by there was a sudden sound of blaster fire. Three of the advancing security guards dropped, shot down from behind, and two figures burst through the gap.

The one in the lead was the General. Behind him ran the giant bodyguard – with Peri's unconscious body slung over his shoulder.

They sprinted for the silver spaceship, blaster-fire crackling around them.

The Doctor grabbed Hawken's arm in a steely grip. 'Tell your men to hold their fire – please! They'll hit Peri.'

Hawken hesitated for a moment, then wrenched his arm free of the Doctor's grip. Cupping his hands around his mouth he bellowed, 'Hold your fire! This is Commander Hawken. *Hold your fire!*'

Still using Peri as a shield, the General and his bodyguard ran for the landing ramp. Blasters and laser-rifles trained on the perimeter guard, his troops drew aside to let him pass. At the foot of the ramp, the General paused and turned, the huge bodyguard carrying Peri beside him.

He saw the Doctor standing beside Hawken and, just as when they had

first met, their eyes locked.

This time the General deliberately dropped the shields that guarded his mind, and there occurred the full mind-touch that happens when two Time Lords meet.

The force of the General's personality struck the Doctor like a blow.

One word, one name, flashed across the Doctor's mind, like a jagged streak of lightning across the night sky.

Morbius!

'No!' shouted the Doctor, and started to run forward.

He felt a stunning impact and everything went black. .

Chapter Fifteen

Kidnapped

The Doctor awoke with a throbbing headache and a soreness behind his left ear. A voice said, 'Come on, Smith, wake up.' Big hands grabbed him under the arms and lifted him into a sitting position.

A soft female voice said, 'Drink this, you'll feel better.'

'Am I in a hospital soap opera?' wondered the Doctor dreamily: 'The kind old Benton used to watch back in the UNIT

days? In that case my next line must be, "Where am I?"'

He opened his eyes and saw where he was – in the bedroom of his quarters. Standing beside the bed was the towering figure of Commander Hawken. Beside him was a white-robed nurse with a beaker of steaming liquid.

'Come on, Smith, wake up,' said Hawken. 'I didn't hit you that hard!'

Cautiously the Doctor touched the sore spot behind his ear.

‘Why did you hit me at all?’

‘My dear Smith, you were hell-bent on running straight into a field of concentrated blaster-fire. You’d have been smeared all over the spaceport. You nearly knocked me over when I tried to stop you, you’re a lot stronger than you look. So...’

Hawken held up an enormous fist.

The Doctor nodded. ‘Thanks!’

Memory came flooding back, the firefight at the spaceport, the unconscious Peri slung over the giant bodyguard’s back.

The Doctor sat up. ‘Peri!’

‘Long gone,’ said Hawken. ‘They all scuttled into their ship and took off.’

‘Haven’t you got any ships here? Why didn’t you go after them?’

‘And risk catching them?’ said Hawken cynically. ‘Remember your story about the man who caught the Tartar, Doctor – it would have been like chasing a swarm of hornets. Besides, once they’d warped into hyperspace...’

The Doctor nodded, accepting the logic of what Hawken said. The mysterious realm of hyperspace was trackless. Once you entered it, you vanished and reappeared, if you’d set your coordinates right – and if you were lucky – somewhere close to your real-space destination.

Peri was gone.

‘Drink the herb tea,’ advised Hawken. ‘It’ll help with the headache if with nothing else.’

The Doctor took the beaker from the nurse and sipped the hot, bitter liquid.

‘Then smarten yourself up,’ Hawken went on.

‘Why?’

‘Crisis conference with the Governor in an hour’s time. For some

reason he wants your advice. He seems to think you know a lot more than you're letting on.'

'He's right,' said the Doctor. 'I do.'

Peri, too, woke up with a splitting headache. For her there was no nurse with herb tea. Just two of the General's soldiers leaning over her prone body and examining her with far too much interest.

The nearest, a scrawny little character with a stubbly chin, said, 'Awake then are we, dearie? I'm Nate and this is Gorgo.

You'll get to know us much better soon!'

He ran a grimy hand across her cheek, down her neck and over her shoulder. Before his wandering hand could go further, Peri sat bolt upright and punched him on the nose, hard enough to produce a little spurt of blood.

'Lousy bitch,' he snarled, drawing back his hand.

An even bigger hand came over his shoulder, grabbed his wrist and dragged him back.

'Steady,' growled a deep voice. 'Don't bruise the fruit. Not unless you want to find yourself doing a space walk without a spacesuit. She's the General's, remember.'

Nardo was the General's giant bodyguard, the one who'd knocked her out.

Nate wiped the blood from his face with the back of his hand.

'Till he tires of her, then it'll be our turn.' He grinned evilly at Peri. 'We'll meet again before too long, lovely.' He licked the blood off his lips. 'When we do I'll teach you a few new tricks.'

They both headed for the door.

'Hey!' shouted Peri.

Nate turned round with a leer.

'Changed your mind, dearie? The General's busy, you know.

Plenty of time for a quickie before he comes. He'll never know!'

Ignoring him, Peri spoke to Nardo. 'How about something to eat and drink? I feel faint, and I'll be no use to your General unconscious.'

The bodyguard grunted. They both went out and the door slid closed behind them. She heard the metallic click of the lock.

Peri looked round, taking in her surroundings. She was in a small, bare, windowless spaceship cabin furnished with a bunk, a metal table and a chair. An open door gave a view of a cubicle with basic hygiene facilities.

Peri got up and went over to the cubicle. She splashed her face with water and drank a little water from the tap. It was tepid and tasteless, obviously recycled, but it made her feel a little better.

She went back to the bunk and sat down, considering her situation.

Not too good, to put it mildly. Peri was no believer in fates worse than death, and she might be able to cope with being the General's mistress. But the thought of becoming a general amenity for the crew when their brief romance was over was something else entirely.

Briefly she thought about killing herself – but only briefly.

There didn't seem to be any useful tools around for the purpose for one thing. And there was something very negative about suicide.

She remembered the Doctor saying that in any situation, however bad, there was always a chance, as long as you kept watching and waiting and hoping.

'Never give up till you're dead,' he used to say.

She thought about her last meeting with him, bitterly regretting the way they'd quarrelled.

'You were right about the General, Doctor,' she thought. 'I only hope I live long enough to tell you so.'

The door slid open and a gnarled and dwarfish little man hobbled in carrying a loaded tray and an assortment of garments over his arm. He dumped the tray on the table and gave her the customary leer. This one was particularly repellent for being toothless.

'Here, keep yer strength up, dearie. You'll need it. The General will be here soon.' He tossed the clothes on the bunk.

‘Get yerself cleaned up and put some of this gear on. The General likes things nice.’ He gave her another toothless leer.

‘I’m Sammie. We’ll be meeting again, when I gets my turn. They always makes me wait till last, but never mind. Good things come to ’im what waits, eh?’

He shuffled out and the door closed behind him.

Life on this spaceship, thought Peri, was like being a succulent bone in the middle of a pack of starving dogs – or the last cake on the plate at a tea party.

Someone was always wanting to eat you up.

She looked at the contents of the tray. A plate held hard biscuits, leathery strips of dried meat and some weird-looking withered fruit. There was a jug with accompanying beaker. Tray, jug, beaker, plate and eating utensils were all made of battered-looking, heavy-duty plastic.

The jug was filled with some reddish liquid. Peri poured some into the accompanying beaker and took a sip. It was thin, sour wine. She had a fleeting worry about it being drugged, but dismissed it. After all, why should they bother?

She was completely in their power.

Peri made herself eat every scrap of the unappetising food, washing it down with the wine. Food was fuel.

When the meal was over she examined the bundle of garments on the bed. It consisted of a number of multicoloured robes, all thin, filmy and virtually transparent. It was easy to see what kind of rendezvous the General had in mind. Candlelight and violins probably wouldn’t be a big feature.

Peri sat on the bunk, chin in hands, thinking furiously. There must be something she could do, some weakness of the General’s she could play on.

She remembered something the Doctor had said about him.

‘There’s an enormous amount of ego under all that charm, a tremendous vanity...’

Was that the answer?

In her mind she replayed her conversation with the General at the reception. And afterwards in the courtyard by the fountain.

‘It’s an old trick,’ she muttered. ‘But it just might work!’

Peri picked up the eating knife from the tray. It was a simple instrument with a serrated edge, the sort of thing you got with airline food in her own time. Strange how little some things changed over the centuries.

She studied the knife for a moment. Then she unbuttoned her dress and slid it from her shoulder.

Gritting her teeth, she began scraping at her own flesh with the plastic knife.

The Doctor and Commander Hawken were sitting in Lord Delmar’s luxurious study, sipping champagne from Copernicus Two. The festive atmosphere was marred only by the presence of Reverend Mother Maren. She had refused all offers of refreshment and was standing silently behind Delmar’s chair.

‘A particularly fine vintage, this,’ said Delmar. ‘I trust you enjoyed your customs sample, Commander Hawken?’

‘Only in the course of duty, my lord,’ pleaded Delmar. ‘I had to make sure that nobody was trying to poison you. Mr Smith was kind enough to join me in my researches.’

Lord Delmar smiled. ‘Very noble of you both.’ He turned to the Doctor. ‘And now, Mr Smith, Commander Hawken gives me to understand that you may be able to assist us in this difficult situation.’

‘The social amenities are over,’ thought the Doctor: ‘Time for business.’

‘I very much hope so,’ he said. ‘To begin with, I must tell you that I am a Time Lord.’

‘We suspected as much,’ said Lord Delmar calmly.

‘For that reason, I can tell you that the General is also a Time Lord.’

Lord Delmar gave a cackle of laughter. ‘Takes one to know one, eh?’

‘You might say that. There is usually an element of mutual recognition. Unfortunately, the General managed to seal his mind from me. It was only in the very last minutes that he dropped the shield and I realised what – and who – he was.’

‘And who is he?’ asked Hawken bluntly.

‘His name is Morbius. Not just a Time Lord, but the most powerful, the most dangerous of us all. He was our President for a time, but he was stripped of his office and exiled from Gallifrey for high treason.’

Lord Delmar nodded, apparently unimpressed. ‘And what’s the feller up to now?’

‘Morbius tried to lead the Time Lords into a policy of warfare and conquest. He was expelled for his pains. Now he plans to carry out that policy himself. He aims to conquer the galaxy.’

‘Using the kind of scum he brought here with him?’ snorted Delmar. ‘Fat chance!’

The Doctor leaned forward. ‘Please don’t underestimate him, my lord. You met him yourself, you must have formed some idea of his quality. He has tremendous charisma and almost hypnotic powers of persuasion. Not to mention almost unlimited funds. Moreover, he seems to be some kind of military genius.’

Delmar snorted again. ‘Don’t see it myself. Hawken here saw him off all right.’

‘It was a damned close-run thing,’ said Hawken. ‘We had a great deal of luck, my lord – and thanks to Smith here, we had considerable help from the Sisterhood! And he wasn’t even here in force.’

‘Look what he’s achieved so far,’ urged the Doctor. ‘He’s taken a bunch of space pirates and welded them into an efficient fighting force. He’ll use that force to conquer weaker planets and use them to make himself stronger. When he feels strong enough he’ll turn to the more powerful planets, conquering them or making them his allies.’

‘How?’ demanded Delmar. ‘What’s he got to offer them?’

‘Power,’ said the Doctor. ‘Power and immortality.’ He glanced at Maren. ‘That’s why he tried to steal your stocks of the Elixir – to bribe his associates.’

‘It brought him little profit,’ croaked Maren.

‘He sent a squad of men,’ said the Doctor. ‘Next time, when he feels strong enough, he will send an army.’

‘Let him! We shall destroy that too.’

‘Beware the sin of arrogance, Reverend Mother,’ said the Doctor. ‘You have great powers, but one bolt from a blaster can still end your immortality.’

Old Maren’s eyes flashed with anger but she made no reply.

‘All the same,’ protested Lord Delmar, ‘I find it hard to believe that one man – even a Time Lord – will be ever be able to achieve so much.’

‘Do you?’ said the Doctor. ‘Many years ago, on old Earth, there was a humble lieutenant of artillery. He started with none of Morbius’s advantages, but he rose to be Emperor of France –

and he took a bunch of ragged revolutionary soldiers and used them to conquer half the world.’

Lord Delmar nodded. ‘Napoleon Bonaparte.’ He smiled at the Doctor’s surprise. ‘The study of the history of old Earth is a hobby of mine. You really think this Morbius could be another Napoleon?’

‘I fear so, my lord. I met the real one once, and they’re very alike.’

Lord Delmar raised an eyebrow. ‘Indeed? Perhaps we should find ourselves another Duke of Wellington!’

Impatient with all this historical byplay, Commander Hawken broke in.

‘All right, Smith, we’ll accept that this Morbius is highly dangerous. What do we do about him?’

‘First, look to your defences. Get what help you can from the planets that use your Hospice. And above all, help the Sisterhood to guard the Temple of the Flame. One day Morbius will return. Karn and the Elixir are central to his plans.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Warn the Time Lords. Morbius is one of their own – our own. It’s the

responsibility of the Time Lords to deal with him.'

'A task for you, surely Mr Smith,' said Lord Delmar gently.

'I suppose it is. But there are problems. It's true that I'm a Time Lord – but I'm also a renegade.'

'Like Morbius?' said Hawken.

'Not in the least like Morbius. All I ever wanted was my freedom. He wants to conquer the cosmos, I just want to explore it. All the same, there are problems attached to my returning to Gallifrey.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' said Lord Delmar. There was an edge of steel in his voice. 'All the same, under the circumstances, I think we really must insist...'

'Oh, I'll go,' said the Doctor. 'I've done it before. Though as a result my liberty became somewhat circumscribed.'

'Locked you up, did they?' asked Hawken sympathetically.

'No, exiled me to Earth, which was almost as bad.' The Doctor turned to Lord Delmar. 'I'll willingly warn the Time Lords for you. But with your consent, and your help, I'd prefer to do so in a different identity. I'd like you to send me there – as Ambassador of Karn.'

Lord Delmar considered for a moment.

'An excellent idea, Mr Smith. Consider yourself appointed!'

Delmar and Hawken began discussing the details, but the Doctor was only half-listening.

He was thinking of Peri.

Chapter Sixteen

Ambassador

Peri was lying stretched out on the bunk when the door opened.

She looked up and saw the General standing in the doorway.

She was still wearing the linen dress she'd worn all day. It was rather grubby by now, and so was Peri.

The General looked down at her disapprovingly. 'You should be washed and changed by now, my dear. My time is limited, you know.'

'All right,' said Peri listlessly. She got up and began unbuttoning her dress, slipping it off her left shoulder.

'I do think it's terribly brave of you.'

The General frowned. 'Brave? What do you –'

Suddenly he noticed that the skin on her shoulder was red-raw, suffused with an angry-looking rash.

'What's that?'

'It's the disease,' said Peri mournfully. 'Some kind of jungle-rot. That's why I was surprised when –'

'But you were cured! You told me you were about to leave the Hospice. Solon said he'd operated for an arm wound and the operation was a complete success.'

'It was. But there was some kind of poison in the saliva of the creature that attacked me. It gave me this. Doctor Solon thought he'd cured it too but it recurred. Apparently it's some completely unknown variety of fungus. Solon says it's incurable.'

Peri lifted up her dress and showed him another inflamed patch on her thigh. 'There are patches like this all over my body.'

Eventually they'll join up. When it reaches my face I think I'll kill myself.'

The General recoiled in horror, a hand going to his face.

'Got you!' thought Peri with savage joy. She'd been banking on the General's overwhelming vanity. He wouldn't risk spoiling his precious good looks.

'You must leave the ship at once,' said the General. 'I've an army to command: I can't risk being riddled with some terrible disease.'

It was what Peri had been hoping for. 'I understand,' she said. 'Just drop me off anywhere you can.'

'No time for that,' said the General brutally. 'I'm in a hurry, and I can't afford to make any detours. I'm dropping you off now.' He raised his

voice. ‘Guards!’

Two soldiers, the ones she’d seen when she awoke, came hurrying along the metal corridor. ‘Prepare the escape pod, put her in it and send it off,’ ordered the General. He turned to Peri.

‘You’ll have air, food and water for three days. We’re still on the trade routes. Somebody will probably pick you up.’

He hurried away down the corridor.

The two guards looked at each other in amazement.

‘Seems a waste just to shoot her off like that,’ said the smaller one, ‘Couldn’t we just...’

Suddenly the General reappeared. Beside him was the thin man in black with burning red eyes – the one she’d seen at the reception.

The General said, ‘And don’t touch her, unless you want to die a horrible death. She’s diseased!’

The black-clad man whispered something in the General’s ear.

‘Certainly not,’ snapped the General. ‘She’s contaminated, her blood would poison even you. Wait till the next planet and I’ll find you a nice plump prisoner.’

They hurried away. It was all over surprisingly quickly after that. The guards, now as horrified as the General, herded Peri along the corridor at blaster-point until they came to a coffin-shaped door in the ship’s hull with a control panel beside it.

The smaller guard touched a control and the door slid back.

It gave onto a coffin-like compartment holding a long low couch with a head-rest at one end.

‘Inside,’ said the guard.

Peri hesitated for a moment and then clambered in. Her scheme had worked rather too well. If she refused to go now, they’d simply kill her and jettison her body into space.

As soon as she had settled on the couch, the door slid closed and everything started to vibrate. There was a sudden jolting sensation – then absolute silence. Peri guessed that the escape pod had been

discharged. She was drifting in space while the General's ship went on its way.

She started to take stock of her surroundings. She was in a long, low, dimly lit compartment, shaped rather like the inside of a giant cigarette.

A narrow tube projected from the ceiling, its end close to her mouth. Compartments within hand-reach on either side held little packets – condensed space rations, thought Peri. She sucked cautiously at the end of the tube and was rewarded with a trickle of lukewarm water.

At the end of the couch was some kind of astronaut-type sanitary arrangement – something Peri preferred not to think about.

A dashboard in the low ceiling held a simple com-unit and a steadily pulsing light. The light, Peri hoped, signalled that the pod was emitting some kind of distress signal. The com-unit was to make contact with any ship that came close enough.

If any did.

Peri ate some of the space rations – a peculiarly nasty kind of dry biscuit – took another sip of water and settled back onto the couch. Strangely enough, she felt more resigned than frightened.

A ship would come, or it wouldn't. She would live or die, neatly packed in her own floating coffin. She would know in three days.

Three days...

Pert drifted off to sleep, wondering about the Doctor.

The Doctor stood by the entrance ramp to Lord Delmar's space yacht, saying goodbye to Commander Hawken and Reverend Mother Maren.

Lord Delmar had generously loaned him the yacht so that he could travel in suitable style. He had also provided a set of ambassadorial regalia, including a gorgeous blue and gold uniform, a white-plumed cocked hat and a gold chain with a seal of office.

'I think you're safe enough for the moment,' the Doctor was saying. 'Morbis won't risk another defeat, he'll return in force.'

But it will take him some time to gather that force.'

'By which time you'll have gathered a force to oppose him,'

said Hawken.

‘I admire your confidence! I’ll certainly try. Meanwhile, I’d put what forces you have on full alert, just in case I’m wrong.

And keep a guard on the Temple of the Flame. The Reverend Mother will give you her full cooperation, I’m sure.’

‘We need no guard,’ said Maren confidently. ‘If the evil one returns, we shall know of his approach long before he arrives.

We shall deal with him ourselves.’

‘Don’t get over-confident,’ said the Doctor. ‘Psychic powers aren’t effective against laser-cannon. If you do sense danger, warn Commander Hawken and coordinate your efforts.’

He looked ruefully at the towering Hawken and the black-robed, wizened form of Reverend Mother Maren. An oddly matched couple of allies, he thought. But maybe common danger would keep them together.

‘Well,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’d better go. It’s a long way to Gallifrey.’

‘Sure you won’t take a pilot and some guards?’ asked Hawken.

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I’m better alone. No point in risking any more lives.’

‘Won’t the Time Lords think it odd, an Ambassador flying his own ship?’

‘If it comes up, I’ll tell them it’s a matter of security,’ said the Doctor. ‘They’ll like that – they’re very keen on security.’

He shook hands with Hawken, bowed to Reverend Mother Maren and went up the ramp.

Minutes later the ramp retracted and the space yacht blasted off.

Solon watched it go from the window of his office.

He turned to Drago, who was hovering deferentially as usual.

‘Good riddance to him, meddling fool. With any luck his fellow Time Lords will dispose of him. According to Morbius, they’ve been after him for years.’

‘And the girl’s gone too,’ said Drago sadly.

‘Morbius is welcome to her,’ said Solon dismissively. ‘Come, Drago, we have work to do. We must prepare for the day of his return.’

Drago looked alarmed. ‘We must? How?’

‘Come and I will show you. You will be amazed at the progress I have made. That last phial of Elixir made all the difference.’

When they reached the secret laboratory, he led Drago through the ante-room into the main chamber, where rows of sheeted forms lay on their stone slabs.

Solon bellowed, ‘Squad, attention!’

Slowly *all* the covered forms lurched to their feet, the sheets falling away.

Solon surveyed them proudly. Row upon row of mutilated corpses, roughly repaired and cobbled crudely together, the pallid flesh seamed and scarred. Body parts from different races and different species were joined indiscriminately, with alien claws dangling from humanoid arms and insectoid heads on biped shoulders.

Drago shuddered, but Solon’s eyes glowed with pride.

‘An Army of the Dead,’ he whispered. ‘When Morbius strikes from without, we shall attack from within!’

The small conventional spaceport outside Gallifrey’s Panopticon is little used.

Time Lords, if they travel at all, travel by TARDIS, and visitors from other planets are not encouraged.

There was considerable surprise when a space yacht emerged from hyperspace and landed without warning, passing the transduction barriers without apparent difficulty. Alarms were sounded and by the time the ship’s ramp came down, the ship was surrounded by a gorgeously uniformed squad of the largely ornamental Capitol Guard.

They waited in suspense until a solitary figure emerged, his apparel even more colourful than their own. He bore several large parchment scrolls, ornately sealed.

At the bottom of the ramp, the figure confronted the guard captain, a

nervous young aristocrat called Alaron.

‘How did you pass the transduction barriers?’ demanded Alaron.

‘I was given the codes,’ said the newcomer loftily.

‘Diplomatic courtesy.’

‘Who are you? What do you want here?’

‘I am the Ambassador of Karn,’ said the Doctor. ‘Here are my credentials. I wish to see your Lord President.’

Alaron took the credentials and studied them. They looked genuine enough. The stranger was either a distinguished visitor or a dangerous spy.

Unused to anything actually *happening* when he was on duty, Alaron decided it was all too difficult. Safer to refer the matter to higher authority. He saluted and said, ‘Very well, sir. Please follow me.’

The Doctor straightened his plumed hat, took a firmer grip on his scroll of office, and strode after the young officer.

‘Well,’ he thought, ‘so far so good...’

Unbidden, the ever-present worry surfaced in his mind.

What had happened to Peri?

Interlude

(I)

‘I was picked up by a space freighter – on the third day,’ said Peri. ‘They were returning empty to Sylvana after delivering a cargo of vegetables to a nearby planet.’

She was sitting in the Supremo’s luxurious state room recounting her adventures. Freshly bathed and gowned, she was at the coffee and liqueur stage of a lavish gourmet meal, served by silent, soft-footed orderlies. Quite clearly, nothing was too good for the Supremo.

Opposite her sat the Supremo himself, stern-faced and immaculate in his black uniform, close-cropped fair hair gleaming in the light of the glow bulbs. An apologetic aide entered with an urgent despatch. The Supremo studied it, dictated a brief order into the aide’s com-unit and

waved the man away, turning his attention back to Peri.

‘You were doubly lucky,’ he said briefly. ‘Lucky Morbius believed your story, lucky to get picked up. What happened next?’

‘They were pretty decent guys on the space freighter,’ said Peri. ‘Agricultural types, young farmers and market traders. I told them I’d been kidnapped by space pirates and managed to escape. They took me to Sylvana with them, to the capital city –

that’s called Sylvana as well. They even took up a collection for me, so I had a few local credits to get started. I went to the authorities and got temporary citizenship papers as a refugee. I tried to contact Karn to let you know I was still alive, but they said galactic war had broken out and all communications were disrupted. Anyway, I couldn’t get through.’

‘So what did you do?’

‘I settled down on Sylvana. There didn’t seem to be any alternative. I found myself a room, got a work permit, got a job as a waitress in a cafe, made friends. Some of the space-freighter crew kept in touch – I had several chances to be a farmer’s wife.’

‘What about the war?’

‘Didn’t seem to affect us,’ said Peri. ‘Sylvana’s pretty remote.

Pretty inward-looking as well. They worry more about the bean crop than about galactic politics. Occasionally we heard about great space battles and devastated planets, but it didn’t seem to have much to do with us. I kept expecting to hear about the General, but they said all the trouble was caused by someone called Morbius.’

‘Same difference. The war caught up with you, eventually?’

Peri nodded. ‘After about a year. Suddenly the spaceships landed and we were occupied. It was a walkover: Sylvana’s got no kind of army. Everything changed after that.’

‘How?’

‘Sylvana used to be kind of a relaxed and happy place. Slow and easy-going. Now, suddenly everyone was afraid. The occupying power took over the farms and ran them as military collectives. People were drafted for forced labour. All political activity and discussion was

banned. People got beaten up, one of my friends was raped. Anyone who argued simply disappeared.'

Peri paused. 'I didn't like it.'

'All the same, you were lucky, Peri – triply lucky. Sylvana was invaded by the regular army of a fairly civilised planet called Freedonia. Morbius persuaded Freedonia to form an alliance with him. As occupying armies go, theirs wasn't too bad. If you'd had Morbius's usual gang of Gaztaks...'

'I still didn't like it,' said Peri.

'So you got involved?'

'One day in the cafe I heard a bunch of half-assed revolutionaries planning to ambush an arms hovertruck. It was a lousy plan and I told them so. So they said if I'd got a better idea

– and I had.' Peri shrugged. 'After that, one thing kind of led to another...'

'According to my intelligence people, you built yourself quite a reputation.'

'I seemed to have a talent for the work. I've changed, Doctor...' She paused for a moment and then went on. 'We did quite a bit of damage in our time, but gradually they started to run us down. Mine was the last active group, and I got them all killed. They were going to shoot me when your soldiers turned up, gave me the red carpet treatment and whizzed me off here.'

The Supremo nodded. 'I issued instructions to my Intelligence staff that you were to be searched for on every planet we took. It was all I could do, I was pretty busy at the time.'

'All right, Doctor,' said Peri. 'That's the story of how I became the bandit queen. But that's small stuff. Suppose you tell me how you became the Lord High Panjandrum.'

'The same as with you, Peri, one thing led to another.' He paused, gathering his memories of what seemed like another life.

'It all started on Karn, just after you were kidnapped. I decided that the Time Lords had to be told what had happened on Karn, but there were reasons why I didn't want to go as myself. So I got myself

appointed Ambassador and went to Gallifrey to warn them about Morbius...’

Chapter Seventeen

Trapped

The Doctor sat waiting in a small, ornately decorated conference room in the Panopticon. Unsurprisingly, he had been waiting for some time. The length of the wait would be precisely timed to demonstrate just how unimportant he was to the Time Lord hierarchy.

He studied his reflection in an ornately framed mirror, wondering if his disguise would be sufficient. There were the ornate clothes, of course – they made a surprising difference.

Apart from that, his fair hair had been cropped brutally short, and a designer drug, provided by Commander Hawken’s intelligence department, had darkened his normally fresh complexion. Hawken had assured him that the effect would fade

– eventually – unless he took a fresh dose.

But the real changes were internal. The Doctor believed that disguise wasn’t a matter of wigs and false noses, but of *becoming* the new character you were taking on.

He sat rigidly upright in the ornately uncomfortable chair, the mildest hint of suppressed resentment on his face. The High Ambassador of Karn would be unused to being kept waiting. He would also be an expert at concealing his feelings.

At last he heard the tramp of feet in the corridors outside the ante-room. He heard the ritual chant of, ‘Make way for the Lord President,’ coming from the Captain of the Presidential Guard.

The double doors were flung open and two gaudily uniformed Presidential Guardsmen marched in, taking up positions on either side of the door.

Two contrasting figures appeared in the doorway. One was a tall, white-haired old man in presidential robes. The other, considerably younger, was a slighter, sharp-faced man in the robes of a Junior Cardinal.

Unhurriedly, the Doctor rose and bowed. ‘I am the Lord High

Ambassador of Karn.'

The old man said, 'I am President Saran.' Conscientiously he added, 'Acting President to be precise. This is my adviser, Junior Cardinal Borusa.'

The Doctor nodded coldly, but his mind was racing. Saran he remembered vaguely as a very minor figure in Time Lord history. But Borusa! One of the greatest Time Lords of all. A future President with whose fate the Doctor was – was to be –

closely linked. But thanks to the paradoxes of time travel, this was a different Borusa, perhaps in his first incarnation.

A very different Borusa, sensed the Doctor, at the beginning of his long and distinguished career. A Borusa with the ferocious ambition that he had always had, but with none of the wisdom and benevolence he had later acquired.

Borusa and the Doctor had a long and complicated relationship stretching over many incarnations. An older Borusa, grown in years and wisdom, had been a younger Doctor's tutor at the Academy. .

For a moment the Doctor felt almost hurt that Borusa didn't recognise him despite his disguise. But, of course, as far as Borusa was concerned, they were meeting for the very first time!

The President waved the Doctor back to his seat, and he and Borusa took their places at the circular conference table.

'I understand that you wish to consult us on a matter of some urgency,' said Saran.

The Doctor glanced towards the guards beside the door.

'The matter is not only urgent, but extremely confidential.'

'The members of the Presidential Guard,' began Saran.

'Have friends and relatives – and tongues,' said the Doctor.

Saran looked at Borusa, who waved the guards away.

They stamped indignantly out, slamming the double doors behind them.

The Doctor passed his scrolls across the table. 'My credentials.'

He sat back, waiting as Saran studied them, passing each one in turn to Borusa. Besides his documents of accreditation, the scrolls contained a letter from Lord Delmar, requesting the Time Lords to give full and serious consideration to his Ambassador's message.

Borusa put the last of the scrolls aside without comment.

'In what way do the affairs of Karn concern us?'

Knowing his fellow Time Lords, the Doctor decided to start by appealing to their self-interest.

'The affairs of Karn concern you very closely. Karn is the home of the Temple of the Flame, the only source of the Elixir of Life – and that source is endangered.'

'We do not depend on the Elixir,' said Saran loftily.

'Perhaps not,' said the Doctor. 'But you are more than pleased to make use of it in emergencies. In cases of aborted bodily regeneration, it's the only effective treatment. Why else did you sign the Treaty of Rassilon – offering the Sisterhood your protection in return for a steady supply?'

'You know a great deal about our affairs, Ambassador,' said Borusa.

'I know what is necessary to perform my duty,' snapped the Doctor. 'That duty is to inform you that the Elixir, the Hospice of Karn and the entire galaxy are all in danger – and that the responsibility is yours and yours alone.'

'You are insolent,' said Saran furiously. 'We will not tolerate

—'

Borusa interrupted the tirade. 'With respect, Lord President, I think we should at least listen to the Ambassador's message.'

He turned to the Doctor. 'These are grave charges, Ambassador.

Can you substantiate them?'

'If I may be allowed to,' said the Doctor. 'Preferably without interruption.'

Saran glared, Borusa nodded, and the Doctor went on with his exposition.

‘Some time ago, a renegade calling himself General Rombusi asked permission to hold a peace conference on Karn.

Generously, Lord Delmar agreed, and in due course the General arrived with his delegates. However, Commander Hawken, Lord Delmar’s security chief, was suspicious, as I was myself. Our investigations established the General’s true purpose – or rather purposes – in coming to Karn. One was to hold not a peace conference but a council of war, with the aim of plunging the galaxy into conflict. The second was to raid the Temple of the Flame and steal all available supplies of the Elixir.’

‘And did he succeed?’ asked Saran.

‘No. We were able to frustrate his plan. But the General escaped, threatening to return with an army. Before he left, he revealed his true identity.’

‘Which was?’ asked Borusa impatiently.

‘I think you already know,’ said the Doctor. ‘His name is Morbius.’

Neither Saran nor Borusa reacted. Suddenly the Doctor realised the truth.

‘You described yourself as Acting President, my lord,’ he went on.

Saran inclined his head. ‘An election is impending. Once all the arrangements have been made, I shall hope to ratify my position.’ He glanced ironically at Borusa. ‘Others also have hopes.’

Ignoring the byplay, the Doctor said, ‘The appointment of an Acting President suggests an emergency – the sudden departure of the existing President, perhaps?’ He paused. ‘Of President Morbius?’

‘Ex-President Morbius,’ said Borusa. ‘We deposed him.’

‘May I ask why?’

It was Saran who replied. ‘He had certain plans – plans which ran contrary to all Time Lord tradition.’

‘Such as taking over the galaxy?’

‘Something like that.’

‘So you deposed him,’ said the Doctor. ‘And?’

Borusa shrugged. 'We sent him into exile.'

'You mean you turned him loose,' said the Doctor bitterly.

'Turned him loose to wreck the galaxy. Did you really expect someone like Morbius to retire and cultivate his garden?

Someone with ferocious vanity and the powers to make his mad dreams of conquest come true.'

'Surely you exaggerate, Ambassador,' protested Saran. 'It is true that Morbius attempted to lead our Time Lord race into paths of conquest, but we rejected him. What can he possibly do on his own?'

'A great deal,' said the Doctor grimly. 'Don't you realise?

He's an incredibly charismatic leader, and a military genius as well. By the time he came to Karn he'd already taken over a handful of frontier planets. By now he'll have conquered more.

He threatened to come back to Karn with an army, and he meant what he said. He's got to be stopped. Or one day you'll find him on your doorstep, with most of the thugs and killers in the galaxy behind him.'

Saran and Borusa looked at each other, slowly realising the size of the problem they faced.

Saran said defensively, 'What would you have us do?'

'Act for once in your decadent, pettifogging Time Lord lives,' said the Doctor furiously. He was conscious that his anger was betraying him into some very undiplomatic language, but he'd gone too far to stop now. 'Deal with Morbius. He's one of your own, isn't he? You're responsible for him.'

Borusa said, 'We have only your word for it that this renegade is Morbius, Ambassador. He could have been lying.'

'It was Morbius all right,' said the Doctor.

'How can you be so sure?' persisted Borusa.

'Can't you decode a simple anagram? Morbius – Rombusi.

He's so vain that he couldn't bear to part with his name, so he scrambled it instead.'

‘Scarcely compelling evidence,’ said Saran. ‘After all, it could merely be coincidence.’

The Doctor looked at them in unbelieving scorn. They were looking for a way out, a way to get off the hook. After all, if the General wasn’t Morbius, he was scarcely their responsibility.

They could go on doing nothing – always the preferred option for the Time Lords. He should have expected it of course. After all, it was why he’d left them in the first place.

He made one last desperate effort. ‘Believe me, *it was Morbius!* I recognised him –’ The Doctor broke off, suddenly realising that he couldn’t explain his certainty without revealing his true identity.

Borusa pounced on the slip. ‘But surely, you’d never met.

How could you recognise him?’

‘How could he not?’ said a voice from the doorway.

A grey man was standing in the doorway.

Grey robes, grey hair, and even a greyish tinge to the complexion. Only the bright green eyes added a touch of colour.

Nodding to the guards behind him to close the door, the grey man came over to the table and sat down, nodding to Borusa and Saran.

‘I was not aware that you were invited to this meeting, Councillor Ratisbon,’ said President Saran.

‘I invited him, Lord President,’ said Borusa. ‘The Ambassador’s arrival aroused certain questions in both our minds. I authorised Councillor Ratisbon to investigate and report.’

‘I beg your pardon for the intrusion, my Lord President,’

said Ratisbon with smooth insincerity. ‘Only the fact that I have important information to contribute gave me the temerity. .’

‘What information?’ demanded Saran.

The grey man paused. It was obvious, thought the Doctor, that both Borusa and Saran hated and feared him. It was equally obvious that the fact caused him not the slightest concern.

‘You were asking how the Ambassador could be so certain that he recognised Morbius,’ said Ratisbon. ‘But as I said, how could he not?’

‘Which means?’

‘Surely one Time Lord can always recognise another?’

‘The Ambassador is not a Time Lord,’ said Saran peevishly.

‘Oh, but he is. His mind is well shielded, but he is a Time Lord nonetheless. I can even tell you which Time Lord.’

Ratisbon gave the Doctor a friendly smile. ‘Welcome home, Doctor.’

Chapter Eighteen

The Deal

‘Thank you,’ said the Doctor politely. ‘It appears I’m not quite the master of disguise I thought I was. How did you get on to me?’ ‘I heard of the arrival of this strange ambassador – a foreign ambassador who knows our transduction codes – and who pilots his own spaceship...’

‘Security,’ said the Doctor solemnly. ‘Surely you appreciate that!’

‘Of course,’ said Ratisbon. ‘All the same, I was curious.’ He smiled apologetically. ‘After all, it’s my business to be curious.

Perhaps I should explain that I’m –’

‘With the Celestial Intervention Agency? Don’t bother, I recognise the type.’

‘I’ll try and take that as a compliment, Doctor. To continue, I took the liberty of searching your spaceship.’

‘Not mine,’ corrected the Doctor. ‘Borrowed, from Lord Delmar. I’m sure you found nothing incriminating.’

‘Oh, but I did, Doctor. Liberal samples of your DNA on the various surfaces you’d touched. I checked them with our files –

and there you were!’

Saran and Borusa seemed to feel they were being left out.

Borusa made an attempt to regain control of the situation. He glared accusingly at the Doctor.

‘So, you’re an impostor – *Ambassador*! Surely you realise this invalidates your entire story?’

‘You’re wrong on both counts,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m not an impostor at all – those papers are all quite genuine. I really am an Ambassador of Karn, duly appointed by Lord Delmar. And as for my real identity invalidating my story – on the contrary, it supports it!’

‘How?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘Do you really think I’d have come back to Gallifrey – under any disguise – if I wasn’t sure that my warning was vitally important?’

Borusa gave him a look of baffled rage. ‘Why didn’t you come as your true self?’

‘To be honest, I wasn’t sure how I’d be received. The High Council tends to hold grudges about relatively minor matters...’

‘Like the theft of a Type Forty?’

‘Borrowing,’ pleaded the Doctor. ‘At worst, taking and driving away. It’s scarcely the latest model; it’d probably have been scrapped if it wasn’t for me.’

President Saran, who’d been silent for some time, suddenly, and surprisingly, reasserted his authority

‘I think we must continue this discussion in your absence, Doctor. Meanwhile, I must thank you for your warning. In spite of the rather strange surrounding circumstances, I believe it to be sincerely meant. Whether or not we should act on it remains to be decided.’

The Doctor rose, his face grave. ‘Let me assure you, Lord President, that everything I’ve told you is the truth. We *must* deal with Morbius. He is one of our own, and we are responsible for the harm he may do. If Morbius carries out a fraction of his present plans, the honour of the Time Lords will be sullied forever.’

Guards surrounded him as he left the room. He heard angry voices rising behind him, then the double doors closed, cutting them off.

‘Come along, sir,’ said Captain Alaron. ‘We’ve arranged suitable accommodation for you.’

‘In the deepest dungeon beneath the Capitol, I suppose?’

Alaron looked shocked. ‘Oh no, sir, nothing like that.’

It was some time later, and the Doctor was stretched out on a comfortable couch, refreshments on a table beside him. He was sipping fine wine and nibbling at an assortment of hors d’oeuvres.

He was in the sitting room of a luxurious suite. The room was filled with heavy, over-stuffed comfortable furniture and there was an entertainment suite with an extensive supply of holovids. Doors led off to a kitchen stocked with the finest food and drink, a luxurious bedroom, an elaborate bathroom with a small gymnasium beyond.

There were no windows, but the air in the room felt cool and fresh.

The Doctor found the degree of comfort more sinister than reassuring.

He was in an oubliette suite.

It was a typical Time Lord solution to the problem of disposing of awkward individuals. No assassinations, no midnight executions, no dank and dripping dungeons with prisoners chained to the walls. Such things are crude and cruel, unworthy of highly civilised Time Lords.

In an oubliette suite, you wanted for nothing. Food and drink and even the holovid cassettes were automatically renewed.

You could do anything you liked – except leave.

There you stayed until you went mad, or killed yourself or simply died.

Then careful functionaries would take your body away and ready the place for the next occupant.

The Doctor knew that if the Time Lords decided to do nothing about Morbius, they would do nothing about the Doctor either. They would simply leave him where he was. His hopes, such as they were, depended on one simple fact. For all their faults, for all their hypocrisy and corruption, the Time Lords were, at heart, an ethical race.

The Doctor settled down to wait, not knowing if the wait would last

hours, days, weeks, months or years – or the rest of his lives.

In the conference room his fate hung in the balance for some time.

President Saran was reluctant to embark on a course of action that might jeopardise his chances at the forthcoming elections.

Borusa wanted to avoid a major scandal at a tricky time in his political career.

Ratisbon felt that stopping Morbius was an impossible task, best not attempted.

But at the end of the day, the Doctor's hopes were justified.

All three wrestled with their consciences and failed to overcome them.

There could be only one decision.

President Saran summed up. 'However much we may regret it, gentlemen, however much we may wish it were not so, one thing is inescapable. The Doctor is *right*. We must deal with Morbius.'

He raised his voice. 'Guards! Bring back the Doctor.'

It was with considerable relief that the Doctor saw the outer door to the suite slide open and Captain Alaron beckoning him to leave.

In the conference room, he found three grave-faced Time Lords awaiting him.

'We have decided to act upon your warning, Doctor,' said President Saran.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor. 'What action have you decided to take?'

'That has yet to be decided.'

Borusa said, 'Since Morbius seems to be the source of the problem, why not take him out of the equation?' He looked at Ratisbon. 'I understand your organisation has certain resources.'

'I take it you mean assassination?' said the Doctor. 'Quite apart from any ethical consideration –'

'I'm not concerned with ethics,' said Ratisbon. 'I leave that to my betters.'

‘Well then?’ said Borusa. ‘It’s the simplest solution.’

‘Except that it wouldn’t work,’ said the Doctor. ‘Morbius is surrounded by devoted fanatics. And even if it did work, chances are you’d only turn him into a martyr. Hundreds, thousands of mini-Morbiuses would arise to carry on his work.’

Ratisbon said, ‘There is always temporal action. If someone goes back in time and kills Morbius in his cradle...’

Saran looked horrified. ‘Unthinkable.’

‘It is my task to think the unthinkable.’

‘The dangers are too great,’ said Borusa firmly. ‘It is against all Time Lord principles. Besides, we risk doing more harm than good. Unpick one fragment of the time fabric and who knows how much more will unravel? Temporal intervention can only be used in the greatest emergency.’

‘I agree, of course,’ said Ratisbon. ‘But this might be the greatest emergency.’

President Saran said firmly, ‘We shall resort to major temporal intervention only when every other possibility has been exhausted.’

Ratisbon sighed and turned to the Doctor. ‘Since you brought us the problem, Doctor, perhaps you can bring us the solution. What do you suggest?’

The Doctor had used his waiting time in the oubliette suite to good effect, brooding over the problem until the only answer suggested itself.

‘Morbius is a military problem,’ he said. ‘The only possible solution is a military one. He must be defeated in battle so that his reputation is destroyed.’

‘There’s a problem with that,’ said President Saran. ‘We don’t have an army. There’s the Capitol Guard, of course, but their function is largely ornamental.’

‘If you don’t have an army, then you must raise one,’ said the Doctor.

‘Where from?’ asked Borusa. ‘We could raise a volunteer militia from the Shobogans, I suppose. They like fighting.’

‘You’ll need more than a few Shobogans to deal with Morbius,’ said the Doctor. ‘He can call on the combined resources of several planets.’

‘So what can we do?’ asked Borusa.

‘You must call upon the great empires,’ said the Doctor.

‘Draconians, Sontarans, Cybermen. The Earthmen and all their various colonies.’

‘Why should they help?’

‘Because, in the long run, Morbius is a threat to them as well.

For the moment, he’s gobbling up isolated planets. When he’s strong enough, he’ll turn on the big powers as well. You’ll have to convince them, play them off against each other. You’ll need to set up some kind of central military command as well, or the different elements will spend all their time squabbling.’

‘And how do we go about achieving all this?’

‘You need a kind of roving ambassador. It’ll take a real diplomat, someone with great persuasive powers. A senior Time Lord, someone with real authority.’

‘Quite a task,’ said President Saran. ‘It will call for someone with wide experience of the cosmos.’

‘Someone used to dealing with many different alien species,’
said Ratisbon.

‘Someone with imagination and daring, not afraid to risk his life,’ said Borusa

‘Well, I’m sure you’ll find someone,’ said the Doctor briskly.

‘After all, you’ve got the whole of Gallifrey to choose from.

Now, if you’ll forgive me, I’ve delivered my message and I must be on my way. I’ve got a space yacht to return and a missing companion to find.’

He started to rise, but Ratisbon put a hand on his arm.

‘Not so fast if you please, Doctor. There are one or two more matters

to discuss.'

'Such as?'

'There are various charges still standing against you, Doctor.

With rigorous investigation, more could be discovered.'

'Or manufactured?'

'If necessary,' said Ratisbon. 'There is also the question of the roving ambassador, the one chosen to carry your warning to the great powers of the galaxy. You see, we think we've found a suitable candidate.'

'Really?' said the Doctor. 'Who's the lucky –' He broke off, seeing three pairs of eyes fixed upon him. 'Oh, no! No chance. I told you I'm far too busy to –'

'We offer you a deal, Doctor,' said Ratisbon. 'All charges against you will be wiped from the records and you will be unconditionally released – provided that you agree to accept this mission.'

The Doctor considered for a moment – but there was little to consider. He was trapped. He could do nothing while he remained a prisoner on Gallifrey. He still had to find Peri – but that wasn't incompatible with the mission.

And there was something else. Years of passive observation had made the Time Lords dull and unenterprising. He really *was* the best candidate for the job – and in his hearts he knew that he wanted to take it.

'Very well,' he said. 'I accept.'

'Excellent,' said Ratisbon. 'The Draconian and Sontaran Empires are the most powerful in contemporary time.

Concentrate on them...'

Chapter Nineteen

The Mission

'But Ambassador,' said the Emperor of Draconia, 'why should my people concern themselves with the problems of faraway frontier planets of which we know little?'

Inwardly the Doctor groaned. This was his first, and perhaps his most important, meeting in his new role as Ambassador.

It was not going well.

He was standing before the throne of the Emperor in the Audience Hall at the Draconian Court. It was a handsome chamber, magnificently furnished in the green and gold the Draconians always seemed to favour.

Robed court officials were grouped around at a respectful distance. On the raised dais before him, the Emperor of Draconia sat on his golden throne, magnificent in his formal robes.

In his white and gold Time Lord ambassadorial robes, if possible even more elaborate than the uniform provided by Karn, the Doctor blended well with his opulent surroundings.

He felt a sudden pang of nostalgia for his beloved cricket blazer.

Clearly intrigued by the arrival of a messenger from the usually reclusive Time Lords, the Emperor had received him courteously. His long, thin face impassive, the slanting green eyes alert and curious, the Emperor had listened politely to the Doctor's impassioned plea for military aide.

His first reaction, however, had not been encouraging.

'These planets are inhabited mostly by humans, are they not?' the Emperor went on.

'Humans and humanoids, your majesty,' agreed the Doctor.

'The Earthmen are not precisely our enemies, but they are certainly not our friends. And as for the Time Lords – we bear them no ill will, but we know too little of them to see them as friends or allies. I cannot see that the actions of this renegade Morbius are of any concern to the Empire of Draconia.'

'Not as yet, your majesty,' said the Doctor grimly. 'But they will be. By now at least a dozen planets have come under his sway. Each planet is looted, and Morbius uses the combined resources of his conquests to attack the next... and the next! He is a military genius with the charisma to win over his former enemies. Somehow he persuades, or compels, their armies to join his forces. All the thieves and rogues and space pirates of the galaxy are flocking to join him too, drawn by the

lure of loot and the false promise of eternal life.’ He paused to draw breath.

‘Morbis grows stronger with every conquest. Unless we stop him now, he will grow too strong to be stopped at all.’

The Emperor smiled. ‘You speak eloquently, Ambassador.

But all the same...’ He broke off as an official hurried into the audience chamber, approached the throne and bowed.

‘Well?’

‘My humble apologies, your majesty, but there is important news. I judged that you would wish to hear it without delay.’ He glanced meaningfully at the Doctor.

‘Shall I withdraw, your majesty?’ asked the Doctor.

Impatiently, the Emperor nodded his head – which, from a Draconian, as the Doctor knew, meant ‘no’. He waved to the official. ‘You may speak.’

‘A scout ship has arrived from one of the newly founded outer colonies, your majesty, carrying the survivors of an unexpected attack. The rest of the garrison was massacred.’

The Emperor rose to his feet. ‘Who has dared to do this?’

‘The attackers carried a black flag, your majesty, emblazoned with a red “M”.’

The Doctor felt a sudden surge of relief – a feeling of which he was immediately ashamed. All the same, the timing... For once, it seemed, Morbis had overreached himself.

‘That is the banner of Morbis, your majesty,’ he said.

The Emperor’s slanting green eyes flashed with rage. ‘It appears that your warning comes too late, Ambassador.’

‘I greatly regret that it does, your majesty. But it is still not too late for action.’

For a moment the Emperor stood poised. ‘Summon the War Minister!’ He turned to the Doctor. ‘We shall discuss your proposition further...’

In a secure conference room in the heart of the Capitol a secret meeting was being held. President Saran presided. Also present was Junior Cardinal Borusa.

The purpose of the meeting was to receive a highly confidential report from Councillor Ratisbon of the Celestial Intervention Agency.

‘You are sure that nothing can be traced back to us?’ asked Borusa.

‘Quite sure,’ said Ratisbon. ‘The mercenaries were hired through three distinct cut-outs.’

‘One of them may talk,’ said Saran worriedly.

Ratisbon smiled. ‘I doubt it. The second link in the chain suffered a fatal accident shortly after the arrangements were made. The first agent knows nothing of the third.’

Borusa nodded approvingly. ‘Very thorough.’

Ratisbon shrugged. ‘Merely a routine precaution.’

‘The mercenaries’ instructions again?’ asked Saran fussily.

Ratisbon sighed. ‘To attack the Draconians’ newest and most lightly defended colony, with the banner of Morbius prominently displayed, and to allow one scout ship to escape.’

‘And afterwards?’ asked Borusa.

‘To do the maximum damage in the shortest possible time and then disappear.’

Borusa frowned. ‘Surely Morbius occupies and loots the planets he attacks? Won’t the Draconians be suspicious?’

‘Possibly. But the precise nature of the incident will soon be forgotten in the fog of war.’

‘I dislike the use of these unscrupulous methods,’ said Borusa unhappily.

‘As do we all,’ said Ratisbon. ‘But we ran matrix projections to determine Morbius’s future strategy in the case of continued success. He would have attacked the Draconian colonies eventually, and in greater force. We merely recognised the inevitable and used it to our advantage. If the Doctor is to succeed in his mission, he needs a little

help.'

'Is he aware of these schemes?' asked Saran.

'We thought it better not to trouble him, Lord President.

The Doctor has a somewhat overactive conscience.'

Borusa said, 'And what of the Sontarans?'

'A more complicated affair – and considerably more expensive. It involved the purchase of an obsolete battle-cruiser from a somewhat disreputable arms-dealer. The ship was then renovated and re-armed for one last mission, and a crew of mercenaries hired. The mission has now been successfully concluded.'

'How?'

'A message was sent to Sontaran HQ on Sontara itself, demanding the immediate surrender of all Sontaran colonies to the Army of Morbius. Shortly afterwards an unknown craft attacked and destroyed a Sontaran transport ship. Then the unknown ship itself blew up – some fault in the space drive, triggered by the firing of the missiles apparently. Soon after that, a second message reached Sontara, demanding immediate surrender of the colonies and threatening reprisals for the destruction of one of Morbius's battle-cruisers.' Ratisbon chuckled. 'The Doctor should be warmly received when he reaches Sontara.'

Saran looked appalled. 'Two ships, and all their crews, destroyed!'

Ratisbon looked surprised. 'One ship was crewed by space pirates, the other by Sontarans. Small loss.'

'Not to mention the destruction of most of a Draconian colony garrison,' said Saran. 'Are such methods really necessary?'

'We shall get nowhere with half measures, Lord President.'

said Ratisbon brutally. 'These things must be done thoroughly or not at all.'

'Have you further such schemes in hand?'

'If necessary,' said Ratisbon calmly.

'We must hope they will not be,' said Borusa. 'The more repetition, the

greater the risk of discovery. We have, so to speak, primed the pump. From now on, with any luck, the Doctor will succeed by his own efforts.'

'*Vrag*, Ambassador?' asked Battle-Marshal Skrug. Without waiting for an answer, he turned to the worn plastisteel cabinet behind him and produced a stone flagon and two stone goblets.

He filled the goblets and passed one to the Doctor.

'Don't spill any,' he said with a guttural chuckle. 'They say that stuff can eat through armour plate. Don't want a hole in my battle-cruiser.'

With an inward groan, the Doctor surveyed the vile-looking potion in his goblet. Was it really smoking?

'*Issalon kwai!*' roared Skrug, and tossed down the contents of his goblet.

'*Issalon kwai!*' repeated the Doctor, and did the same. With a mighty effort he managed not to shudder or choke as the burning liquid seemed to set his blood on fire. Instead he held out his goblet for more. With a look of new respect, Skrug refilled the Doctor's goblet and his own.

They were in the state room of Battle-Marshal Skrug's flagship, a bare metal chamber furnished with a map table, a few plastisteel chairs and very little more. Sontarans aren't much concerned with decor.

In keeping with his surroundings, the Doctor wore a plain black uniform without insignia. He'd decided that the Sontarans wouldn't be impressed by white plumes and gold regalia.

Thoughtfully he studied the squat, bulky figure before him.

Skrug had the round head, the narrow lipless mouth and the sunken red eyes shared by all Sontarans. But when a Sontaran grows old the skin becomes more corrugated than ever, and the vestigial bristles of eyebrows, moustache and beard turn pure white.

Skrug was very old, decided the Doctor. Very old and very, very tough. He had survived to attain the highest Sontaran military rank – against, no doubt, the repression of his superiors and the backstabbing and intrigue of his fellow officers.

Moreover, since the Sontaran administration was purely military, he

had also reached the highest political rank as well.

Skrug's position was analogous to that of president or prime minister.

As soon as the Doctor had mentioned Morbius, Skrug had poured out the tale of the insolent demand for surrender and the missing transport ship. He had also poured scorn on the Doctor's suggestion of an affiance with the Draconians.

'I assure you, Ambassador, this Morbius will be punished.

And for that we Sontarans need nobody's help.'

It was extraordinary, thought the Doctor, that Morbius had chosen to challenge the Draconians and Sontarans at one and the same time. So extraordinary as to be almost incredible.

Certain suspicions began to arise in his mind.

Crushing them, he said diplomatically, 'Everyone knows of the might of the Sontarans, Battle-Marshal.'

The Doctor was thinking furiously. For the Sontarans to attack the forces of Morbius was all well and good. But chances were that they would simply inflict enough punitive damage to satisfy their thirst for revenge and then withdraw. Which wouldn't do at all.

What was needed was a prolonged campaign by an intergalactic alliance. This would ensure that the Morbius rebellion would be thoroughly crushed. It would also demonstrate that the civilised races of the galaxy would not tolerate this kind of thing – and that they were prepared to ally themselves to prove it.

'You are familiar with the Draconian Empire, Battle-Marshal?' he enquired.

Skrug took another swig of *vrag*, his little red eyes peering at the Doctor over the edge of his goblet.

'Not familiar, Ambassador,' he grunted. 'We are aware of them. So far our spheres of influence have not clashed.'

'The Draconians are an aggressively military species, and their empire, like yours, is expanding rapidly. Is it not possible...'

'Very possible,' said Skrug cheerfully, the light of battle in his eye. 'If that happens, we will know how to deal with it.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Knowledge of your enemy is important in battle, is it not?'

'Vital,' agreed Skrug. He looked at the Doctor curiously.

'Your point, Ambassador?'

The Doctor took a cautious sip of *vrag*. 'One might learn much of a potential enemy by fighting *beside* him. His weapons, his tactics, his behaviour in battle...'

Battle-Marshal Skrug sat very still for a moment, red eyes gazing into the distance. He reached for the flask and poured more *vrag* into the Doctor's goblet and his own.

'I like your thinking, Ambassador. Tell me more. But first another toast.'

He raised his goblet and drained the fiery contents. '*Issalon kwai!*'

The Doctor did the same, echoing the toast. 'Issalon kwai!'

'A traditional Sontaran toast, Battle-Marshal?' asked the Doctor politely.

Skrug looked surprised. 'No, it is a war toast from old Earth.

I thought you would know it.' He raised his voice and croaked:

'*Issalon Kwai to Tipperary...*

Issalon Kwai to go...'

Chapter Twenty

Battle Plan

The Doctor landed Lord Delmar's space yacht on the rocky plain and descended the exit ramp into baking heat. He looked around, but there was little to see. Acres and acres of hard, rocky desert stretching to a hazy horizon. A herd of blue kangaroo-like creatures disappearing into the heat haze. A few scattered rocks of varying shapes and sizes.

'Doctor!' called a voice.

The Doctor turned and wasn't in the least surprised to see Ratisbon emerge from behind a column of rock and come towards him.

The Doctor felt a brief pang of envy, wondering what it would be like to have an up-to-date, fully working TARDIS. He really must get that chameleon circuit fixed some day. .

‘Greetings, Doctor,’ said Ratisbon. He wore his usual grey robes and looked as cold and wintry as ever, despite the desert heat.

‘Well, I’m here,’ said the Doctor. ‘Now perhaps you’ll tell me why.’

‘We thought Aridus might be a suitable assembly point for your battle fleet, Doctor. No intelligent life forms, isolated and strategically insignificant. Dry, healthy climate...’ Ratisbon swept his hand round the horizon in an expansive gesture. ‘And, as you see, no shortage of parking space.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘It’ll do.’

A shadow fell over the desert as an enormous spaceship blinked out of hyperspace. With a ground-shaking thunder of retro-rockets, it landed close to them.

The Doctor studied it. Twice the size of most battle-cruisers and bristling with sophisticated weaponry, it was an intimidating vessel. A huge golden letter ‘A’ was emblazoned on its side.

The Doctor turned to Ratisbon, who seemed pleased rather than alarmed.

‘Whose ship is that?’

‘Yours, Doctor. The *Alliance*, flagship of your fleet, and the finest battlecruiser in existence. Neither your friends or your enemies have anything half so powerful.’

‘Why do I need a monstrous great thing like that?’

Ratisbon looked hurt. ‘Prestige, Doctor. You can’t lead a mighty battle fleet from a space yacht. The *Alliance* is fresh from the spaceyards on Copernicus Three. Fully staffed with Denali crewmen, the finest spacefarers in the galaxy. Fully supplied as well – water, provisions, wardrobe, everything you need.’

‘How did you get it built so quickly?’

‘It was ordered some years ago, against our present need,’

said Ratisbon.

The Doctor nodded, impressed. The Time Lords had sent an agent back in time so that the ship would be ready today. The fact that they had sanctioned even this limited temporal interference showed how much the crisis had shaken them.

‘Very clever,’ said the Doctor. ‘Speaking of clever plans, those conveniently timed attacks on the Draconians and the Sontarans –’

Ratisbon held up his hand. ‘Please, Doctor, not now. Your new crew is waiting to welcome you aboard. I have attached Ensign Vidal of the Capitol Guard to serve as your personal aide.’ He pointed to the giant spaceship, where a landing ramp was slowly coming down. ‘Messages have been sent to your new allies, asking them to rendezvous with you here. I have been negotiating with them on your behalf.’ He produced a scroll from under his robes. ‘Here is your official appointment as Supreme Coordinator of the Alliance Battle Fleet.’

‘And what’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Whatever you make it mean. I’ll bid you good day, Doctor – and good luck!’

‘One moment,’ said the Doctor. ‘This campaign must be enormously expensive. Where’s the money coming from?’

‘Agency secret funds, not subject to review.’

‘If he’s hiring huge armies of mercenaries, Morbius must have enormous resources as well. Where are *they* coming from?’

Ratisbon hesitated for a moment. Then he said, ‘The same source. Certain members of the Agency were involved in Morbius’s original conspiracy. With their help he took a large chunk of our exchequer with him into exile.’

‘So you’re financing both sides in this war?’

‘Not voluntarily, Doctor. And don’t worry. Morbius left much more behind than he took. If necessary, we can outspend him!’ Ratisbon turned and walked away, disappearing behind the column of rock. Seconds later there was a sighing, humming sound as the rock column faded away.

The Doctor turned to face the giant spaceship. The ramp was fully down now and it was lined with white-uniformed figures. As he

walked towards the ramp, he heard the shrilling of bagpipes.

‘It is perfectly simple,’ growled Battle-Major Streg. He jabbed a stubby Sontaran finger at the holographic star map floating in the air before them. Planets already occupied by Morbius glowed a sinister red. ‘We attack here – the planet which Morbius currently occupies. We re-take the planet and kill him!’

‘Nonsense!’ said High Commander Aril. ‘Your plan lacks all finesse.’ His long, thin Draconian fingers weaved in and out of the myriad twinkling stars. ‘We feign an attack here – and again here. Then we convince the enemy we mean to attack here and here, while the main attack is pressed home here – supported by diversionary attacks here, here and here...’

He went on for some time.

The Doctor sighed. They were holding their first planning conference in the hi-tech war room of his new battle-cruiser. It was not going well.

Outside on the rocky plain, two battle fleets were grouped around the flagship. The Draconian Emperor and Battle-Marshal Skrug had been generous with ships and men. The Alliance now had a formidable force – though one less formidable by far than the ever-growing armies of Morbius. The Doctor knew that the Time Lords were sending ambassadors to all the galactic powers, asking them to join the Alliance. So far no others had responded.

Now the Doctor and his two Fleet Captains were trying to decide on their vital first move. They desperately needed a victory to draw others to their cause.

The Doctor became aware that the two Fleet Captains were still wrangling. ‘Silence,’ he snapped.

Streg and Aril fell silent while the Doctor stared broodingly at the star map.

After a moment Aril said, ‘It seems we shall never agree.

You must decide, Supreme Coordinator.’

Taken aback, the Doctor went on staring at the star map, realising unhappily that he had no idea which plan to choose.

Both plans had merit, both were typical of the minds that had produced them.

The Sontaran plan was that of a bull charging a gate, staking everything on one smashing blow.

The Draconian scheme was as complicated as a game of three dimensional chess, a flurry of brilliantly deceitful moves to confuse and baffle the enemy.

Only – neither plan would work, thought the Doctor with a sudden sinking feeling. They simply hadn't enough soldiers and ships to carry them out. Not yet. .

Streg's grating voice broke in on his thoughts.

'Well, Supreme Coordinator, which plan is it to be?'

'Neither,' said the Doctor firmly. He looked at the two faces, so different in their physiognomy, so alike in their wounded expressions, and saw that tact was necessary. 'Your plan, Battle-Commander Streg, has that classic simplicity for which the Sontaran military mind is so justly famed.'

As far as a Sontaran is capable of beaming, Streg beamed.

'Unfortunately,' the Doctor went on, 'we have not, as yet, the resources to carry it out. The bulk of Morbius's forces will be concentrated on his planetary base. If we attack them head-on, we shall lose.'

Streg sulked.

The Doctor turned to Aril. 'Your plan, High Commander, has the subtle brilliance so typical of Draconian tactical thinking.'

Gracefully, Aril bowed his acknowledgement.

'However,' said the Doctor, 'it involves splitting our already inadequate force into even smaller segments. Should one or more of those segments suffer defeat by Morbius, the whole plan will collapse.'

There was a moment of disappointed silence.

Then Aril said, 'Are we to take it that you have a better plan, Supreme Coordinator?'

To his own surprise, the Doctor heard himself say, 'As a matter of fact, I have. My plan is rather more complex than yours, Battle-Major – yet considerably simpler than yours, High Commander!' He leaned forward, indicating a particular planet.

'We shall attack here!'

'Fangoria? The planet is completely obscure,' protested Aril.

'Of no strategic importance whatsoever.'

'And it couldn't be further from Morbius's current base,'

said Streg.

'Exactly,' said the Doctor. 'And do you know why? It's the first of Morbius's conquests. The very first!' He leaned forward eagerly. 'We are going to follow in Morbius's footsteps, gentlemen. First Fangoria, then Romark, Darkeen, Martak. As fast as he conquers planets, we shall liberate them. Faster, with any luck. He's moving so fast his forces are being spread thin.'

Soon he'll feel us treading on his heels, our hot breath down his neck. Eventually, he'll turn and fight!'

'You rejected both plans because of our inferior forces,'

protested Aril.

'Exactly,' growled Streg. 'Yet now you advocate the very same course you rejected in my plan – attacking Morbius head-on.' 'Yes, but not now, not right away. The final attack will come some considerable time in the future. During that time Morbius's armies will suffer continual attrition. Each planet he conquers has to be occupied, every victory weakens him. But every planet we liberate makes us stronger! We shall arm the inhabitants with captured weapons and spaceships and add them to our forces.'

With a string of victories behind us, the other galactic powers will join our cause. Before the final battle, every minor one will serve as a training exercise, welding us all into a single fighting force.' He rose to his feet. 'By the time we meet Morbius in battle, we shall equal him in strength. We may even be stronger.'

Aril and Streg both rose as well.

‘Genius, sheer genius, Supreme Coordinator,’ said Aril. He saluted. ‘My life at your command!’

‘Coordinator, I too salute you,’ said Streg, and did so.

‘Thank you, gentlemen,’ said the Doctor. ‘Now, return to your fleets and prepare for battle!’

Chapter Twenty-one

First Step

On the last day of his life, Ragar came out of the guard hut, blinking in the morning sun. He yawned and spat and scratched his hairy chest, licked his lips with a dry and furry tongue. He’d been drunk last night, and most of the nights before that. But then, what else was there to do on this stinking planet?

Ragar was a massive brute of a man who carried a whip and a blaster. He looked exactly what he was – a Gaztak, a space pirate, a mercenary killer for hire. He’d been one of the General’s earliest recruits, part of the mercenary army that had captured the agricultural planet of Fangoria. It had been easy enough. There was no kind of army, just a local militia, inexperienced farm boys, part-time soldiers with antiquated projectile weapons. Most of them had been killed.

Capturing the planet had been fun, burning the little country towns, a bit of rape and pillage on the side. But that was all over now. It had been Ragar’s bad luck to be part of the little force left down to hold the planet, to harvest its resources to feed Morbius’s ever-growing armies. Since they were so greatly outnumbered, it was necessary to keep the local population down by a policy of ruthless brutality. Even that palled in time.

One grew tired of flogging and shooting peasants.

Ragar was in charge of one of the vast new military-run farm collectives – which meant that he had to rise at dawn to flog the lazy peasants to work in the fields and stockyards. With increasing frequency Morbius’s cargo carriers landed on the planet, demanding ever-greater quantities of meat and grain and wine. And there was no mercy for the administrator who failed to meet his quota. He was shot and replaced by someone prepared to flog the peasants harder.

Ragar stroked the handle of the whip thrust into his broad leather belt. It wasn’t going to happen to him.

He was about to rouse his squad of guards, who would in turn rouse the slave workers, when something astonishing happened. A spaceship appeared in the sky.

Ragar rubbed his eyes and blinked at it. The collecting cargo vessel wasn't due for another month – and besides, this ship was something very different. It was some kind of battle-cruiser, sleek and deadly. And it was landing.

It landed in the centre of the compound, a ramp came down and a horde of squat figures in battle armour ran down it, spreading out to cover the surrounding buildings.

Ragar turned and yelled into the open door of the hut behind.

'Sound the alarm, we're under attack!'

Confused and dishevelled guards began running out of the hut, some with blasters, some without. One or two fired wild shots and were instantly shot down.

Belatedly, Ragar grabbed for the blaster in his belt and froze as a harsh, grating voice said, 'Stop!'

Three of the squat figures were marching towards him. They wore dome-shaped helmets with eye-slits, and looked both menacing and grotesque. The two on the outside carried heavy blaster rifles, the one in the middle wore a holstered hand-blaster.

The centre figure said, 'Surrender and you will not be harmed.'

'What the hell are you doing here?' blustered Ragan 'Do you know who you're dealing with? This planet is under occupation by the forces of General Morbius.'

'No longer. It has been liberated by the Son – by the Army of the Alliance. Surrender your weapon.'

The figure came closer and Ragar glared down at it. The top of the domed helmet was barely level with his chest. He felt a sudden revulsion at the idea of surrendering to somebody half his size. This one seemed to be the leader. If he could capture him, take him hostage...

Ragar's big hand flashed down and up again in the fast draw that had made him feared on a hundred worlds. He jammed his blaster against

the eye-slit of the domed helmet.

‘ *You* surrender, shorty, or I’ll splatter your brains all over the inside of your tin hat. Tell your troops to drop their weapons!’

For a long moment nobody moved. Then a stubby gauntleted hand flashed up and took the wrist holding the blaster in an iron grip. Bones crunched and Ragar screamed and dropped the blaster. The hand gripping his wrist pulled him forward and down so that he fell to his knees. His captor’s other gauntleted hand swept around in a semicircle, delivering a blow that shattered Ragar’s skull. Blood spurted from his nostrils and he died instantly.

Releasing his grip, the squat figure let the body slump to the ground. He glanced at the other guards, who instantly dropped their weapons and stood with hands held high. He removed his dome-shaped helmet, revealing the dome-shaped skull beneath, the burning red eyes and the almost lipless mouth.

He glanced down at the still-twitching body, and the thin lips moved just a fraction.

Sontarans seldom smile – except at the death-throes of an enemy.

Some kilometres away, at the barracks outside the nearest town, the commandant unwisely ignored the courteously phrased request for surrender from a tall, elegant officer with green skin, slanting green eyes and a high-domed skull.

The officer gave orders to his men and a laser field-cannon was brought forward. A single blast destroyed half the building and killed a quarter of its inhabitants.

With unfailing courtesy, the demand for surrender was repeated.

The commandant and his surviving troops staggered from the ruins, hands held high.

In the war room of his flagship, the Doctor studied a steady stream of reports concerning these and many other similar incidents. By early evening, High Commander Aril was able to confirm that the planet was in Alliance hands.

‘The inhabited parts, of course, Supreme Coordinator,’ said Aril. ‘There are areas of mountain, desert and jungle we have neither the time nor the resources to cover. We must assume that only the

agricultural settlements were occupied.'

'Quite so,' said the Doctor. 'Prisoners?'

'Very few. It seems that once they realised what was happening, many of the enemy embarked upon a foolish, last-minute resistance and had to be killed. They are, mostly hired thugs, not proper soldiers,' added Aril disdainfully.

The Doctor nodded, understanding. Professional soldiers, surprised and manoeuvred into a hopeless position, accepted the inevitable and surrendered, hoping to fight another day.

Hired bullies, however, most of them violent and unstable personalities to begin with, tended to react with berserk rage and get killed for nothing.

'Perhaps it's just as well,' thought the Doctor. 'Most of Morbius's men are no loss to the cosmos, and prisoners are always a liability.' He frowned, surprised for a fleeting moment by his own indifference to death. But one had to be practical, and there was so much to do...

'Have you found any remnants of civil authority?'

'There was an official, a – a *mayor* – in Fangor, the capital city. A man called Makir. He was running the essential services for the invaders, but only because they were holding his wife and daughters in prison as hostages. He's here now, waiting to see you.'

'Bring him in.'

Seconds later the Doctor's hand was being wrung by a tubby balding man in the shiny dark suit of an official.

'Thank you, sir, thank you,' the man babbled. 'I can't thank you enough. To be free, after all this time. Forgive me for troubling you, but my wife and daughters. '

The Doctor looked at Aril who said, 'Safe and well, Supremo. We released them from prison and they're on their way here.'

Makir broke into renewed thanks until the Doctor cut him short.

'I'm giving you back your planet, Mayor Makir – or rather, President Makir.'

The man stared at him. 'Me? President? But I can't –'

‘You’ll have to. I’ve no time to find anyone else. You’d better raise some kind of police force or militia. We’ll give you some of the weapons taken from Morbius’s people. You can use the survivors as a labour force. Choose yourself some good people and form a provisional government. Was there any kind of resistance movement?’

‘I believe so. They were driven out of the cities and went into hiding in the jungle.’

‘Make contact with them when they come out, form an alliance. Don’t let them get above themselves, though, make sure they know you’re in charge.’

The new President looked dazed by the string of orders. ‘But you’ll stay and help us?’

‘Not for long. We’ve a lot to do. Yours isn’t the only planet Morbius conquered. From now on, you must look after yourselves.’

‘But suppose Morbius comes back?’

‘He won’t. We’re going to give him a lot more to worry about. We may need your help...’

There was a confused babble of voices in the corridor and three women forced their way past Ensign Vidal, the Doctor’s scandalised aide. One was middle-aged and plump, one a statuesquely beautiful young woman, one little more than a child.

At the sight of them Makir cried, ‘You’re safe. Oh, my dears, you’re safe!’

Laughing and weeping at the same time, the three women threw themselves on him, all three trying to hug and kiss him at once. He spread out his arms and drew them to him.

Aril was horrified, and the Doctor said, ‘We’ll talk later, President Makir, after your reunion.’

He made sweeping-out motions to Vidal, who managed to bustle the family group outside.

Cries of ‘Thank you, oh thank you!’ echoed back down the corridor and gradually faded away.

Aril looked stunned. ‘I have great regard for my lady wife, and for our

offspring,' he said. 'But I do not think I could express it so publicly.'

The Doctor smiled. 'The settlers here are of human stock.

They are an emotional species.'

'So it seems.' Aril himself was clearly grappling with unaccustomed emotions. All the same it was – pleasing to witness their happiness, to feel that one had contributed to it. 'If you would excuse me, Supreme Coordinator? I must check on the situation in the field.'

Aril left and the Doctor plunged into the pile of reports.

A few minutes later, Vidal came back into the room. 'If you could spare me a moment, Supreme Coordinator?'

Wearily the Doctor looked up, 'Yes?'

'The Makir family send their thanks. Mr Makir says he will do his best to be a good president. He'll be happy to continue your meeting at any time convenient to you.'

'Ask him to dinner, tonight.'

Vidal made a note on his wrist-com.

'It was a fine thing you did, sir, reuniting them.'

'The credit belongs to High Commander Aril and his officers,' said the Doctor. 'I had very little to do with it.'

'With respect, sir, you had everything to do with it. If it were not for you, none of us would be here – and Mr Makir and his family would still be living in fear.'

'It's nice to feel we've done some good,' said the Doctor.

'Now if that's all...'

'There was one more thing, Supreme Coordinator.'

'Yes?'

Vidal seemed to be having difficulty in getting his words out.

'I was placed here by Councillor Ratisbon to spy on you,' he said at last. 'I am instructed to send him regular reports on all your activities.'

‘Well, of course you are,’ said the Doctor.

‘You knew?’

‘I assumed as much from the beginning. Ratisbon is a typical Agency type; he’s incapable of trusting anybody.’

Vidal swallowed. ‘I just wanted you to know that my reports will always be favourable. You are welcome to see them before they are despatched. Indeed, you are welcome to write them if you wish.’

‘That won’t be necessary. Just deliver honest reports according to your conscience.’

‘Thank you, Supreme Coordinator.’

Vidal saluted and left.

The Doctor touched controls on his desk. A holographic representation of the planet Romark appeared before him...

Chapter Twenty-two

Recruits

‘Well, gentlemen, that concludes the briefing,’ said the Doctor.

‘Remember this. We have had a string of relatively easy victories so far, agricultural planets, lightly garrisoned. But our next target will be very different. Zandir is an industrial world, and its weapon shops are of great value to Morbius. It will be more heavily defended, with greater firepower. It will call for the utmost in combined effort from us all.’

It was some time later. Romark, Darkeen, Martak had fallen, and the Alliance fleet had returned to Aridus to regroup and to prepare for the next assault on Morbius’s empire. Now the Doctor was holding another council of war.

Present were High Commander Aril, Battle-Major Streg and a lean, bearded man called Ryon, who had led a very effective resistance movement on Martak, almost wresting the planet from Morbius’s grasp. He and his men, together with a considerable quantity of captured spaceships and weapons, had been a welcome addition to the Alliance forces.

Martak was a heavily wooded planet, and Ryon’s men were hunters

and trappers, armed with a variety of antiquated projectile weapons.

They were lean, silent types, like Ryon himself, dressed in home-made buckskins.

‘They sure as hell ain’t much to look at,’ Ryon had said when they arrived. ‘But most of ’em can shoot the eyeballs out of a swamp-fly.’

The Doctor looked around the war room. ‘Are there any other matters?’

‘There is one,’ said Aril. ‘It is trivial, but irritating. A dispute has arisen as to which segment of the Alliance should have the honour of providing your personal guard. We Draconians would be proud to do so.’

‘As would the Sontarans,’ growled Battle-Major Streg. ‘We should also be considerably more efficient.’

‘Seems to me the Coordinator might prefer a more human-looking personal guard,’ drawled Ryon.

Aril and Streg began noisy protests and the Doctor waved them to silence.

‘Does it really matter?’

‘It does to those involved,’ said Aril. ‘It is a matter of honour.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ said the Doctor wearily. ‘I suppose we’ll have to work out some kind of rotation system.’

It was one more care added to hundreds but, as the Doctor knew, trivial matters like this could cause endless ill will.

Ensign Vidal burst breathlessly into the war room. ‘A spaceship, Supreme Coordinator, it’s landing...’

‘Are the troops on alert?’

‘Yes, but I don’t think it’ll be necessary. There’s only one ship, very old and battered, and it’s landing in the middle of a circle of our battle-cruisers.’

Battle-Major Streg looked up from his wrist-com. ‘Our laser-cannons have it covered. Shall we destroy it?’

‘Certainly not,’ said the Doctor. ‘Let’s go and see who it is.’

He led the way out of the war room.

As they came down the ramp, the strange ship was just landing in a cloud of desert dust. It was, as Vidal had said, old and decrepit. They watched as a rusty landing ramp creaked down and a group of extraordinary-looking figures descended.

Roughly humanoid in shape, they were enormous, somewhere between two and three metres tall. They had high, bald foreheads fringed with long, coarse straggly hair and they had jutting, ape-like jaws. They wore baggy leather trousers and tunics, and shirts made of sack-like material. They carried an assortment of weapons, axes, machetes and antiquated blasters.

They were Ogrons.

As they emerged from their ship, a squad of Sontarans sprinted from the nearest battle-cruiser, blaster-rifles in hand, encircling them and covering them with smooth efficiency.

Close behind came a commando squad of Draconians, and beyond them a loose circle of Ryon’s men.

The Ogrons turned, snarling, reaching for their weapons, but the Doctor called, ‘It’s all right, nobody will harm you. Who is your leader?’

The most massive of the Ogrons separated himself from the group and came forward.

‘I am Vogar, clan chief.’

‘Why have you come here?’

‘Army of Morbius attack our world. Kill many.’

‘Did they occupy your planet?’

‘No. Say world dirty rock, not worth having. Kill many and go.’

It was a believable enough story. The Ogron planet was bleak and barren, scarcely supporting its population, a few bands of wandering Ogrons. Most young male Ogrons left the planet as soon as possible. They roamed the galaxy, earning their livings as mercenary soldiers and security guards. They were well suited to the work. Ogrons

weren't bright, but they had a kind of animal cunning that served them well. Moreover, they were brave and strong, and ferociously loyal once they'd accepted employment.

'So you want your revenge?' said Streg.

Vogar grunted. 'Kill Morbius,' he said simply. 'Kill Morbius and all who follow him.'

Streg nodded approvingly. 'Well, you've got the right spirit.

How many of you?'

'Some – here, more in ship,' said Vogar. He held up a massive paw, fingers spread. 'Six hands altogether.'

High Commander Aril regarded the scruffy-looking Ogrons with elegant disdain. 'Too small a force to be of use,' he said.

'Besides, we'd never make soldiers of them. Shall I send them away, Supreme Coordinator?'

'Certainly not,' said the Doctor. 'Inter-species cooperation is essential to the success of the Alliance. We can't afford to turn anyone away, and Ogrons have many useful qualities.' Suddenly a mischievous thought struck him. He looked up at the Ogron leader.

'Stay with us and fight the armies of Morbius, Vogar. I have work for you.'

'What work?'

'I will make the Ogrons my personal bodyguard.'

Splutterings of protest came from Streg and Aril.

Ignoring them, the Doctor looked up at the barbarous, shabby creature towering above him.

'Will you serve me, Vogar?'

The Ogron looked down at the Doctor's slight, black-uniformed figure unbelievably. He looked round at the Sontarans in their gleaming battle armour, at the immaculately uniformed Draconians.

'You leader here?'

‘You could say that.’

‘You make *Ogrons* personal bodyguard? In place of honour?’

‘In the place of honour.’

For a moment Vogar stood impassive. He turned to the group of Ogrons behind him, roared guttural commands and shoved them bodily into roughly ordered ranks. He turned back to the Doctor. ‘We serve you – to the death.’ He jerked a hairy thumb at High Commander Aril. ‘What *he* call you?’

‘You are in the presence of the Supreme Coordinator,’ said Aril reprovingly.

‘Supremecord... Supremeco,’ said Vogar gutturally. He shook his massive head. ‘Too hard. Ogrons say Supremo! We guard Supremo!’

It was next day and the Doctor was sitting in the war room – he never seemed to leave it these days – studying the final plans for the attack on Zandir. He heard shouts and scuffling from outside the door and sighed, guessing what was happening: The Ogrons had a tendency to be over-conscientious in their bodyguard duties. It had taken the Doctor some time to convince them that he didn’t need all of them guarding him at the same time. When they’d finally grasped the principle of working two at a time as sentries on the door, they’d started out by refusing to let *anybody* in. Even now, they insisted on an embarrassingly high level of security.

The Doctor rose and went to the door. It opened before him and he saw Ensign Vidal and the two Ogron sentries in the corridor outside.

The immaculately uniformed Vidal, who was clutching a large parcel, was doing his best to maintain his dignity. This was made considerably more difficult by the fact that one of the Ogrons had grabbed him by the collar and was holding him up in the air, feet dangling above the deck.

‘Kindly ask this creature to release me, Supremo,’ said Vidal.

‘I have a vital message.’

The Ogron looked at the Doctor who nodded. The Ogron let go and Vidal dropped to the deck.

The Doctor looked up at the Ogron. ‘You’re trying a little too hard,’ he

said.

The Ogron looked crestfallen. ‘Ogrons do wrong?’

‘No, no, you’ll soon get the hang of it. Just remember, you’re here to protect me from my enemies, not my friends.’

‘Who friends?’

The Doctor considered. ‘Friends are anybody on this flagship. Anybody in the Alliance, come to that.’

‘How we know enemies?’

‘An enemy is someone who actually shoots at you.’

Leaving the Ogrons struggling to absorb this new information, the Doctor went back into the war room and Vidal followed him.

‘I hope they take that in,’ said the Doctor, as he returned to his seat. ‘If they pick up Battle-Major Streg, he really will shoot them. You had a message?’

‘A fleet of about a dozen spaceships has landed in the desert some way away.’

‘Hostile?’

‘There’s no sign of it. They’ve sent a message to say they’re sending an emissary by scoutship. He should be landing at any moment.’

‘We’d better go and greet him, then,’ said the Doctor.

‘One moment, if you please, Supremo,’ said Vidal.

Unwrapping his parcel, he produced a black uniform tunic, very like the one the Doctor was wearing, but considerably more ornate. It was obviously made of much finer material, a rich and soft velvety black cloth. It had a higher, more military collar, gold braid at collar and cuffs and a gold ‘S’ embroidered over the heart.

The Doctor looked at it with distaste. ‘Do you really expect me to wear that?’

‘Please, Supremo,’ pleaded Vidal. ‘It is the wish of your officers – and indeed of their troops – that you should wear a uniform befitting the dignity of the Alliance.’ Seeing that the Doctor still looked

unconvinced, Vidal played his trump card.

‘Your senior officers collaborated on the design, and the flagship tailor worked all night to construct the garment. Everyone will be hurt if you refuse to wear it.’

‘Oh, very well,’ said the Doctor sulkily. He shrugged out of the plain black tunic and put on the new one.

Vidal fussed round him, adjusting the fit of the collar and cuffs.

‘Unfortunately, the black trousers with the gold braid and the jackboots are not yet ready, but this will serve for now.

There!’

Vidal stepped back and the Doctor studied his reflection in a highly polished steel bulkhead. Instinctively, his back straightened and his face fell into harsher lines.

‘Am I wearing the uniform,’ he wondered, ‘or is the uniform wearing me?’

It was the Doctor who looked into the mirror – but it was the Supremo who looked back at him.

He turned and marched from the room followed by Vidal.

Outside the door, two Ogron sentries crashed to attention and presented arms. Not the same two, the Doctor noted, but two others. Their sacking shirts were clean and neat, their leather trousers and jerkins were new, their boots highly polished.

The weapons they carried, ancient blaster-rifles, were oiled and gleaming.

Even their straggly hair had been brushed and groomed – as far as it’s possible to groom an Ogron.

The Doctor studied them for a moment and gave a brief nod of approval.

He marched down the wide metal corridor, Vidal at his heels, and the two Ogrons fell in and followed.

As they emerged onto the landing ramp, there were more surprises in store.

An honour guard had been mounted. There were Sontarans to one side, commanded by Battle-Major Streg, Draconians headed by High Commander Aril to the other. Behind the Sontarans were ranged the Ogrons, tidied, like the two sentries, into something very near smartness. Ryon's irregular troops, headed by Ryon himself, were behind the Sontarans, their motley uniforms neat and clean.

The Doctor stood for a moment at the top of the ramp, surveying the scene.

'Ensign Vidal?'

Vidal came forward. 'Supremo?'

'What's all this?'

'A dress parade, Supremo. Like the new uniform, it was the wish of both officers and troops.'

'But why?'

'Soldiers set great store by such things, Supremo. They wished to show you what they could do.' Vidal looked across the hot and dusty plain to where a silver scoutship was just landing.

'The arrival of the emissary was fortuitous, Supremo. But the parade may serve to impress him with the strength of the alliance.'

The Doctor nodded. There was nothing he could say or do.

The military life had him in its grip and he must play his role.

As he set off down the ramp, followed by Vidal and the Ogron bodyguards, martial music struck up. The Doctor heard the dull boom of Sontaran drums and the shrilling of Draconian bagpipes.

When he reached the bottom of the ramp, the music stopped. Streg, Aril, Ryon and Vogar marched forward and saluted. Simultaneously, their troops crashed to attention.

The Doctor's eyes moved over the serried ranks.

Draconians, Sontarans, Ogrons, humans and humanoids, all standing gleaming and motionless in the hot desert of Aridus.

He turned to his officers, raising his voice so that it carried to the ranks.

‘Thank you, gentlemen. I am surprised and impressed. A splendid display.’

Battle-Major Streg looked disappointed. ‘Do you not wish to inspect the troops, Supremo?’

The Doctor shuddered inwardly at the thought of spending hours under the burning sun, inspecting Draconian buttons and Sontaran belt-buckles.

‘Nothing would give me greater pleasure – although I can see the excellent standard of turnout from here. However, duty calls. We must welcome our visitor. Come with me, gentlemen.’

The Doctor marched across the burning plain towards the scoutship.

Ensign Vidal, the Ogron bodyguards, High Commander Aril, Battle-Major Streg, Vogar and General Ryon fell in and marched behind him.

As they began to approach the scoutship, the landing ramp descended and tall silver figures appeared in the doorway. The Doctor studied the weirdly blank metal faces with the little round eyes and the odd, handle-like projections in place of ears.

‘Cybermen,’ he thought. ‘Arrogant and paranoid. They’ll make difficult colleagues. But they fight well enough. And twelve extra battle-cruisers will come in useful when we attack Zandir.’

His face impassive, the Doctor marched on towards the scoutship. The Cybermen had reached the bottom of the ramp by now.

The Doctor’s party halted and the two groups confronted each other.

The leading Cyberman spoke in his curiously fluting voice.

‘You are the one called Supremo?’

The Doctor nodded.

‘We are Cybermen,’ said the Cyberleader arrogantly. ‘We come to join your attack on Morbius.’

The Doctor said nothing.

The Cyberleader looked at the black-uniformed figure with the hard eyes and the harsh, impassive face.

He looked at the menacing figures of the Ogrons behind him, at the Draconian, the Sontaran and the tough-looking humanoid behind them. He looked across to the ranks of motionless soldiers and the line of battle-cruisers behind them.

He looked back at the Doctor and, almost unwillingly, his arm rose in salute.

With a curious note of uncertainty in the fluting voice, the Cyberleader said, 'That is, with your permission – Supremo?'

Recruits flooded in after that, and the Doctor spent long hours keeping the peace, soothing the ruffled sensibilities of different alien species. Sometimes he wondered where it would all end.

One night, as he lay struggling for sleep in his luxurious quarters, the Doctor thought he heard an all-too-familiar grating voice in the corridor outside his room.

'Where is the Doc-tor? We have come to join him. Morbius must be exterminated!'

But it was only a nightmare...

Interlude

[II]

Peri sipped her third, or possibly her fourth, liqueur, aware that she was relaxed to the point of being pleasantly tipsy. But then, it had been an exceptionally long, hard day – with an astonishing ending.

She had told the Doctor of her adventures, and now, somewhat reluctantly she sensed, he was telling her his. It was as though he felt ambiguous about all that had happened to him.

He had to be constantly prodded to go on talking.

'So the Ogrons gave you your new title – Supremo?' she said.

The Doctor laughed. 'The rest of the Alliance took it up immediately. I suppose it had the right ring to it – soldiers like a bit of swashbuckling arrogance.'

'Then those Cybermen things joined you?'

'Cybermen, Ice Warriors, you name it. Plus contingents of every

militant human and humanoid species in the galaxy.'

'Why did they come?'

'Some because Morbius had attacked them, or one of their colonies. Others because they felt that he *might* attack them, and they'd better get their retaliation in first. I think some came just because they liked a good fight.'

'So what happened next? Did you take Zandir?'

'We did.'

'And then?'

'Battles,' said the Doctor wearily. 'Battle after battle. We liberated half a dozen planets after Zandir. You don't want to hear about them, Peri. All battles are much the same.'

Bombardment from space, troop landings, commando attacks, sieges. I get sick of slaughter sometimes.'

Peri looked at him with tipsy shrewdness.

'But you like it, too, don't you? Being the Supremo?'

The Doctor stood up, tossed back his drink and poured another from the decanter on the table.

'Do I like constant praise, adulation, almost worship?'

Absolute, unquestioned authority? Dozens of people breaking their necks to fulfil my every whim? People desperately trying to work out what my next whim will be so I don't even have to ask? As you Americans say, what's not to like?' He paused. 'But there's more to it than that.'

'Is there?' Peri held out her glass and the Doctor refilled it.

He had eaten little during the meal, but he had drunk a great deal

– though without, as far as she could see, the slightest effect.

'There's friendship, Peri – the kind of friendship that closes the gap between species, friends who would willingly die for you and you for them. Above all, there's war! The greatest and most wonderful game of all, unbendingly complex and thrilling and unpredictable...'

‘How can you say that?’ protested Peri. ‘War’s evil, people die.’

‘They do,’ said the Doctor. ‘Your soldiers and the enemy’s.

Worlds are devastated, cities burn, the innocent suffer and die.’

‘That’s right,’ said Peri solemnly. ‘War’s wrong, it’s always wrong.’

‘Is it, Peri? Isn’t ours a good war?’

‘There’s no such thing.’

‘We’ve liberated a dozen planets from Morbius’s rule,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’ve saved hundreds, thousands of people from rape and torture and slavery. We wouldn’t have achieved that by telling Morbius’s soldiers that they were being very nasty and would they please go away.’

Peri felt muddled. ‘I suppose not. All the same...’

The Doctor laughed and put a hand on her bare shoulder.

‘Don’t worry, Peri, some questions don’t have satisfactory answers.’ He slumped down into a chair. ‘All the same, you’re quite right. I do like being the Supremo – far too much.

Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever be able to stop. It’s one thing giving your life for a good cause. But giving your soul...’

He stared moodily into space.

Peri sat very still, wrestling with confused feelings. She could still feel the touch of the Doctor’s hand on her shoulder. She thought about the mild, friendly Doctor she had first known –

and realised that this ruthless, tormented Supremo aroused very different feelings in her.

Ensign Vidal came quietly into the room, looking in mild puzzlement at the two silent figures.

‘My apologies for disturbing you, Supremo, but your next appointment has arrived. She apologises for the lateness of the hour, but she had a difficult journey. Will you see her?’ He glanced thoughtfully at Peri, stretched out on her chaise-longue.

‘Or shall I tell her that you are – otherwise engaged?’

The Doctor stood up. 'That would be rude. Tell her I'll be free in just a moment. See that a guest room is prepared for Miss Brown.'

Vidal bowed and left as silently as he had arrived.

Peri stood up, standing close to the Doctor. 'This guest of yours... Who is she?'

'A sort of diplomatic emissary,' said the Doctor vaguely.

'She's come for a late-night conference. Sorry to break up the party, Peri, but our business is urgent.'

'I bet it is,' said Peri. She moved closer to him. 'Send her away. We don't need her.'

The Doctor reached out and held her close to him for a moment. Then he shook his head quickly and straightened his arms, thrusting her away. 'No.'

'Why not?' she whispered.

He released her and stepped back. 'There's a saying on Earth, Peri – try everything once except incest and folk-dancing.'

I tried folk-dancing once, round a maypole in a place called Devil's End. It didn't work out too well.'

Vidal came into the room, escorting a tall, voluptuous blonde, who looked at Peri with icy indignation.

Nodding to his guest, the Doctor said, 'See Miss Brown to her quarters, Vidal. Sleep well, Peri.'

Not knowing if she was angry or relieved, Peri let Vidal escort her to the door.

As she left, she heard the blonde say, 'Thank you for agreeing to see me, Supremo. This is a great honour.'

'Not at all,' said the Supremo. 'I assure you, the pleasure is mine...'

Peri was a little unsteady on her feet, and Vidal took her arm as he escorted her along the corridor.

'You have known the Supremo for some time, Miss Brown.'

Before he took command?’ he asked.

‘I knew him before his military phase, yes.’

‘I hope no distress was caused to you by...’ He glanced over his shoulder.

‘Heavens no,’ said Peri sleepily. ‘The Supremo and I are just like brother and sister – worse luck...’

Breakfasting alone next morning, the Doctor looked up as Vidal showed Peri into the room. All things considered, he looked disgustingly fit and healthy. He greeted her without any trace of embarrassment.

‘There you are, Peri. I like your new outfit.’

Peri was wearing a set of black space overalls, neatly altered to fit by the flagship’s tailor. They made, she thought, quite an attractive trouser suit.

‘Found them by my bed when I woke up,’ she said. ‘You certainly run an efficient ship, Doctor.’

‘It’s not me, it’s my crew. They have very high sartorial standards. Come and have some breakfast. Fruit juice, porridge, bacon and eggs? Your Sylvana farmers insisted on giving us a whole shipload of fresh produce.’

Peri shuddered. ‘Just fruit juice please,’ she said as she sank into a chair. ‘I seem to be feeling a little fragile this morning.’

The Doctor poured her a glass of fruit juice. ‘We did make rather a night of it, didn’t we?’ he said. ‘Still, it was a celebration.’

He patted her hand. ‘It’s nice to have you back, Peri. Sorry it took so long.’ He became aware that Vidal was still hovering.

‘Yes?’

‘This report has just arrived by space-com, Supremo. In view of its importance, I took the liberty of bringing you a hard-copy transcript.’ He handed the Doctor a roll of thin plastipaper and withdrew.

‘Excuse me for a moment, Peri,’ said the Doctor.

He unrolled the paper like a scroll and studied it intently. A few

minutes later he tossed it onto the table, where it rolled itself up again with a snap.

‘Aha!’ said the Doctor, with evident satisfaction.

Peri took a sip of exotic fruit juice. ‘Aha what?’

‘It worked!’

‘What did?’

‘My plan.’

‘What plan?’

‘We, the Alliance, have been following in Morbius’s footsteps,’ explained the Doctor. ‘Liberating planets more or less in the order he conquered them. As fast as his empire expanded, we were rolling it up behind him. I knew it’d get on his nerves eventually – and it has.’

Peri frowned. ‘So how do you know this plan’s worked?’

‘Because we’ve stopped Morbius – or rather, he’s stopped himself. His march of doom across the galaxy has stopped. He’s established himself on his latest conquest, a planet called Tanith, and settled down, making no attempt to expand his empire.

What’s more, he’s pulling back troops, equipment and supplies from the planets he’s conquered – the ones we haven’t already liberated, that is. He’s preparing to turn and fight. And we’re ready for him now.’

‘So what will happen?’ asked Peri. ‘Some kind of space battle?’

‘It’s quite hard to have a battle in space,’ said the Doctor.

‘It’s too big. It’s hard for the opponents to find each other.’

‘Space is big,’ murmured Peri. ‘Really big. You may think it’s a long way down to the off-licence, but that’s peanuts to space.’

The Doctor looked baffled. ‘Sorry?’

‘Quotation from an old Earth sage,’ explained Peri. ‘Go on.’

‘Then there’s the complication of hyperspace,’ the Doctor went on.

‘Ah!’ said Peri.

‘Galactic distances are so vast that ordinary rocket-drive only enables you to visit the planet next door,’ explained the Doctor.

He was well into his tutorial mode by now. ‘For galactic travel, galactic empires, you need some kind of hyperdrive.’ He picked up the scroll and unrolled it. ‘Look! The ends of this strip of paper are a long way apart. But if I fold the paper like this...’ He touched the ends of the paper together. ‘. . . They’re next door to each other. That’s what hyperdrive does – it folds space. So you see the problem.’

‘I do?’

‘Imagine two opposing battle fleets heading towards each other in space. Chances are they won’t even find each other. If they do, they’ll whizz past each other at incredible speeds, going in opposite directions – no brakes on a spaceship – and have to start looking for each other all over again. And on top of all that, either fleet – or both – could disappear into hyperspace in seconds.’

‘Tricky,’ said Peri.

‘That’s why space battles are fought around planets, Peri, habitable ones mostly. In the end victory depends on what the Duke of Wellington called “that article” – the common foot-soldier.’ The Doctor got up and started pacing about. ‘But which planet will Morbius choose? Will he sit tight on Tanith and wait for us to come to him? Will he make the hyper-jump to some nearby planet and hope to surprise us?’

Peri’s head was spinning. ‘Search me! I never thought when we were on Karn –’

The Doctor swung round and grabbed her shoulders. ‘Of course! Well done, Peri! He’ll go back to Karn. He said he’d return with an army. And he’s got to go back to secure the Elixir of Life to bribe his followers. That’s it, Peri. We must leave at once. The last battle will take place on Karn!’

Book III

The Last Battle

Chapter One

Race for Karn

Morbius paced to and fro in the war room of his flagship. It was not, according to his intelligence reports, and to his immense chagrin, as impressive a flagship as that of the hated Supremo.

But it was a handsome vessel all the same and its war room was the ultimate in hi-tech luxury.

There was no conference table, however. Morbius didn't hold conferences, he issued commands. Its most striking feature was its extensively mirrored walls. From anywhere in the war room Morbius could see his reflection – full length, head and shoulders, full-face, left and right profiles...

He took a reassuring glance at his left profile, the one slightly preferred, and turned to the full-length mirror to take in the details of his gorgeous sky-blue uniform – gold epaulettes, gold braid, scarlet sash, medals and orders (self-awarded), all in place.

He glanced at the scanner, which was showing a series of ever-changing views of the chaos all around the flagship. Electra, the capital of Tanith, had once been one of the most beautiful cities in the galaxy, famous for its canals and exotic gardens. But the citizens of Electra had made the mistake of offering strong resistance, and Morbius's space-cannon had pounded it into submission. Now it was little more than a heap of blazing rubble.

Morbius turned away from the scanner with a nod of satisfaction. He felt no trace of compunction. On the contrary, the fate of Electra would serve as a useful object lesson. Word of such events spread rapidly, and the next planet he attacked would be more reasonable.

His face darkened as he remembered that there would be no new planet for a while. Now he must halt the expansion of his empire, turn in his tracks to smash this insolent swine of a Supremo.

He resumed his restless pacing, turning over old worries in his mind.

'Who is he?' he wondered for the thousandth time. 'Where the devil does he come from? Is he a Time Lord? Myself apart, the Time Lords aren't a martial race...'

Grimoire came into the war room, his black cloak contrasting strangely with the peacock brilliance of his master.

‘Fleet’s ready for departure, General.’

‘Marshal!’ snarled Morbius. He had promoted himself on learning the new title of his hated rival. Supremo, indeed!

‘Fleet’s ready for departure – Marshal,’ said Grimoire. His dead-white face was as impassive as ever, but there was a hint of amusement in the deep-set red eyes. ‘Intelligence report,’ he went on. ‘The Alliance has completed the conquest of Sylvana.’

‘Good,’ snarled Morbius. ‘They’ll stay on-planet for a while performing their usual humanitarian aid nonsense, sentimental swine. By the time they realise we’ve gone, it’ll be too late.’

‘Aren’t you worried?’ persisted Grimoire. ‘They’re not all that many planets behind us now. They’ll catch up soon and we’ll be back where we started.’

Grimoire was the only member of Morbius’s entourage who dared talk to him like this. Sometimes it seemed he enjoyed provoking the Time Lord into one of his ungovernable outbursts of anger. In fact, Grimoire’s icy soul drew a little warmth from the Time Lord’s fiery rages. Morbius had threatened to kill him several times, but Grimoire had no fear of death.

He was dead already.

Morbius responded as predictably as usual.

‘No need to remind me of that, you moronic ghoul!’ he screamed. He stalked towards Grimoire and glared menacingly up at him. ‘But they’re not going to catch up with us, are they?’

We’re going to smash them, just as we smashed that city out there!’ He pointed a quivering finger at the fiery remnants of Electra on the scanner screen.

‘We are?’ said Grimoire sceptically. ‘According to Intelligence, they’ve assembled a pretty powerful battle fleet by now!’

‘We still outnumber them!’ howled Morbius.

‘Yes, but for how long? They’re getting stronger all the time, and we’re getting weaker. Every time they liberate a planet, they gain new recruits. Every time we conquer one, we have to detach men and ships to hold it down and –’

‘Shut up!’ screamed Morbius. Controlling himself with a mighty effort, he stalked across to a desk, grabbed a sheaf of scrawled orders and thrust them at Grimoire. ‘There, does that calm your pettifogging fears?’

Grimoire studied the orders, his burning red eyes widening a little in surprise.

‘You’re sure?’

‘Of course I’m sure.’

‘All of them?’

‘All of them!’

‘You realise what that means?’

‘Just do as you’re told. Now, get to the control room and give the general order for lift-off – and send those orders! Send them as soon as we leave the planet.’

As he stalked along the corridors towards the control room, Grimoire reflected, almost admiringly, that Morbius, ever the great gambler, was staking everything on one last throw of the dice. It would be interesting to see how it turned out. Not that it mattered, of course.

Nothing did.

‘Evil!’ said old Maren. ‘Evil approaches. Destruction and death! I sense it!’

She stood at the mouth of the cave that led to the Temple of the Flame, Ohica at her side. A semicircle of Sisters stood behind them in the cave mouth.

‘Who comes, Reverend Mother?’ asked Ohica.

‘A thief! An army of thieves. The day I have always feared has arrived. They come to steal the Elixir of Life.’

‘What must we do?’

‘Wait!’ ordered Maren. ‘At present they are in distant space, at the very edge of the reach of my senses. I can do no more than detect them. When they are closer they shall feel my power.’

She turned to the little group of acolytes behind her.

‘Form the Circle, Sisters! Begin the Chant of Death!’

Soon a low rhythmic wailing arose from the cave mouth, echoing eerily through the mountain gorges. A mountain eagle flew within range of the sinister sound, checked and twisted for a second, then plummeted dead to the ground.

The chanting went on.

‘Why?’ screamed Morbius, in yet another of his rages. ‘Why did you bring the fleet out of hyperspace so far from Karn?’

Beside him Grimoire suppressed a smile, enjoying the Marshal’s latest tantrum – especially since, for once, someone else was the target.

The fleet navigator, a scrawny, red-faced man with the broken-veined nose of a drinker, was a cashiered Denali space fleet officer. His navigational skills had never been first class, and decades of determined drinking hadn’t improved them. When calculating the hyperspace jump to take them to Karn he had played it very, very, safe.

‘It’s a tricky business, Marshal, hyperspace navigation,’ he whined. ‘One tiny error and you can finish up millions of light-years beyond your target. Either that or in the middle of a planet.’

Didn’t want to risk losing your fleet for you, did I?’

Morbius knew that what the navigator was saying was true –

hyperspace navigation *was* tricky and hideous accidents had occurred. But he also knew that a better navigator would have come out of hyperspace much closer to Karn.

The trouble came, he thought, from having to work with an army of mercenaries. There were plenty of experienced killers available. More technical and scientific skills were hard to come by. He'd approached the Denali, but they'd refused to have anything to do with him, something about a conflict of interest.

He'd had to make do with this drunken ex-Denali wreck.

Still, there was nothing to be done now. Although further from Karn than the Marshal wanted, they were still far too close to risk another jump.

'All right, set course for Karn, maximum warp. Try not to miss it. Let me know when we're in cannon range.' He scowled at the trembling navigator. 'And if the Supremo gets there before us, I'll have your head!'

'Not long now, Peri,' said the Doctor.

They were in the control cabin of the Supremo's flagship.

The cigar-shaped room was quietly busy, with white uniformed crewmen tending the complex banks of instruments that ran along the two sides of the room. At the narrower front end of the cigar was the command seat for the pilot/navigator. The Doctor and Peri were in two seats just behind him.

There was a feeling of controlled tension in the air. They were about to make the jump into hyperspace that would eventually take them close to Karn.

'Is it dangerous?'

'Not going in. Coming out can be a bit tricky.'

'Why?'

'Well, you might not be where you want to be. Worse still, you might be where there's something else already.'

'What happens then?'

'When two objects try to occupy the same space,' said the Doctor solemnly, 'the inevitable result is total annihilation for both!'

'Oh, swell!' said Peri faintly.

‘Don’t worry. It won’t happen. Not with the finest pilot/

navigator in the galaxy at the helm.’

The pilot, a handsome young Denali officer called Taro, turned and smiled, highly delighted by the compliment. ‘Thank you, Supremo, I’ll try to justify your confidence.’ He turned back to his controls.

Peri was suddenly aware of the Doctor’s instinctive gift for leadership.

‘Young Taro would die for him,’ she thought. ‘They all would!’

Taro’s voice rang out. ‘Stand by for jump.’

His voice echoed from loudspeakers throughout the flagship.

‘Entering hyperspace – now!’

‘Brace yourself, Peri,’ said the Doctor.

Peri gripped the sides of her seat – and suddenly everything *shifted*. She had a terrible sensation of having been turned inside out. Then, just as suddenly, everything was normal again.

‘Was that it?’ she asked.

‘It was,’ said the Doctor. ‘Look at the scanner.’

Peri looked. Not long ago the big screen had been showing the planet Sylvana dropping away beneath them. Now all it showed was a swirling greyness.

‘We are now in hyperspace,’ said the Doctor.

‘How long for?’

‘That’s a difficult question. There’ll be a sense of subjective time passing, but it hasn’t got much to do with time in normal space.’ He lowered his voice. ‘It’s a bit like travelling in the TARDIS, but without the time-travel factor.’

‘Does it feel as bad when we come out of hyperspace?’

‘Worse,’ said the Doctor cheerfully. He saw Peri’s stricken face and said, ‘Not really. Same but different.’ He leaned forward to speak to the navigator. ‘When we do come out, I’d like to be not too near and not too far. Near enough to reach Karn pretty quickly, far enough to

assess the situation if Morbius is there before us.'

'Very good, Supremo,' said Taro confidently. 'I'll bring her out at the extreme limit of scanner range.'

The Doctor sat back. 'Won't be long now, Peri.'

They settled back to wait.

'Planet Karn on scanner screens, Marshal,' said Morbius's navigator. With considerable relief he added, 'No sign of any other ships.'

'As well for you. Take the fleet into close geo-stationary orbit above the Castle of Karn. Send for the assault craft commander and his number two.'

Minutes later, a huge bearded mercenary hurried into the room, a smaller scrubbier one at his heels.

'Right, Gorgo, Nate, here are your instructions. As soon as we're in range, you take the assault craft and a squad of picked men and capture the Temple of the Flame. Here's a map: it shows you its position in relation to the Castle.'

'Right, Marshal, leave it to me and Nate.'

'And watch yourselves with those damned women – they're dangerous. The last squad I sent after them never came back.

Kill the lot of them – no, keep one or two alive, we may need information.'

'Right, Commander.'

As they hurried down the corridor, Gorgo said, 'We're in luck.'

'We are?'

'Soft option, taking out a bunch of old women.'

'May not all be old neither,' said Nate with his usual leer.

'Might be time for a bit of fun before we kill 'em.'

Gorgo gave him a punch on the shoulder that nearly knocked him over.

‘You wouldn’t care if it was after, you randy little bugger.’

Chuckling, they went on down the corridor.

Neither had very much longer to live.

Minutes later a hatch in the bottom of the flagship opened. The stubby silver assault craft detached itself and drifted down towards the rocky surface of Karn.

Morbius and Grimoire watched it on the scanner.

‘Sure you sent the right two?’ asked Grimoire, half-hoping to provoke another explosion of rage. ‘Nate and Gorgo aren’t too bright.’

But Morbius only shrugged. ‘Killers don’t need brains.

They’re brave enough, and ruthless. Slaughtering a bunch of old women won’t bother them. I’ve got to have control of that Elixir. And I want that Sisterhood out of the way before we land.

They’ve got some very unpleasant powers.’

The roar of rocket-motors rose over the chanting of the Sisters.

Soon they saw the assault craft appear over the mountain ridges and head down the length of the narrow valley towards them.

‘Concentrate, Sisters, concentrate!’ hissed Maren. ‘Channel your power through me!’

The assault craft was a simple enough affair, designed to get troops to the point of battle. Controls and seats for the pilot and navigator, in this case Gorgo and Nate respectively, were at the front. Rows of metal benches, all filled with armed mercenaries, took up the rest of the craft.

Nate and Gorgo peered at the passing mountainside on the scanner.

‘Should be somewhere here,’ said Nate.

Suddenly Gorgo pointed to the scanner. ‘Look, there it is!

The old dears are all sitting outside.’ He frowned. ‘Looks like they’re singing!’

‘We’ll give them something to sing about soon,’ said Nate.

‘Concentrate!’ hissed Maren. She pointed a skinny finger at the approaching assault craft and a thin ray of light shot from the stone of the ornate ring on her finger.

‘Die, thief, die!’ she screamed.

Suddenly Gorgo screamed and lurched sideways, hands clamped to the controls.

The assault craft lurched sideways too. It slammed into the mountainside and exploded. The Sisters watched from their cave mouth as fiery fragments rained down to the valley floor below.

‘Come,’ said Maren. ‘They will not attack for some little time.

When they do, we shall be ready.’

She led them back into the tunnel.

Morbius gave a howl of rage as he saw the explosion on the scanner.

‘General fleet order! Bombard the Castle from extreme range. We’ll take the Castle first, then flood the Temple with ground troops. They can’t jinx us all.’

Grimoire raised a sceptical eyebrow. ‘They can’t?’

Chapter Two

Fleet Action

Lord Delmar looked up from his soup as the crash of a laser-cannon was followed by the rumble of falling masonry.

‘Sounds like the west tower. Pity really, all this. Quite thought the old place would see me out.’

Commander Hawken pushed his soup plate aside and took a swig of wine. He seemed to have lost his appetite.

Lord Delmar, however, seemed quite unaffected. They’d just started dinner when the bombardment began. Apart from allowing Hawken to use the com-unit to issue a string of orders putting the Castle on full alert, he had steadfastly refused to allow the attack to interfere with his meal.

He finished his soup with a noisy slurp and called the trembling

servant girl.

‘The Commander’s finished, my dear. Clear the plates and bring on the next course. You’ll enjoy this, my boy, roast boar.’

Hawken half rose. ‘My lord, shouldn’t we be doing something?’

‘My dear fellow, what can we do? No doubt our chaps have wheeled out our ancient cannon. They’ll take a pop or two if any of the blighters get near enough. You’ve got the place on alert, so we’ll know to turn out the guard if they start using ground troops.’

‘But my lord –’

Delmar held up his hand, ‘We know from Ambassador Smith’s reports that he’s bringing troops to reinforce us.

Nothing to do but wait till he gets here. Meanwhile, might as well enjoy our dinner!’

The girl staggered in with an enormous silver platter which held a steaming roast of boar surrounded by a selection of local vegetables. She placed it before Lord Delmar, who seized a huge knife and began carving with enthusiasm.

Hawken drained his glass and refilled it from the decanter.

‘To hell with all this aristocratic sangfroid,’ he thought. ‘I’d sooner be outside shooting back – either that, or in a nice deep cellar..’

‘Emerging from hyperspace – now!’ called Taro.

Peri winced and gripped her chair again. As the Doctor had predicted, the *shifting* sensation was the same but different – as if whatever had happened before was being reversed.

She heard Taro’s voice. ‘Planet Karn on scanner screen, Supremo!’

‘Well done, Taro,’ said the Doctor.

They studied the screen, which showed a distant view of Karn hanging in space. ‘Directional magnification,’ ordered the Doctor. ‘Focus on Castle.’

He reeled off a string of coordinates and Taro’s hands moved over the controls. The distant view of Karn was replaced by a closer one, so close that the planet’s rocky surface filled the screen. You could even

make out the tiny shape of the Castle of Karn. Above it hung a cluster of dots which seemed to emit flashes of blinding light.

‘Morbis,’ said the Doctor grimly. ‘He’s reached Karn before us. And he’s bombarding the Castle from space. He’ll reduce it to rubble.’

He sat very still for a moment, thinking furiously. Peri glanced at his hard, set face and saw the face of the Supremo.

Then he leaned forward and tapped Taro on the shoulder. ‘If you’ll excuse me for a moment?’

Taro rose and the Doctor took his place. He stood watching as the Doctor’s hands flickered over the controls, punching in strings of complicated coordinates.

The Doctor rose and Taro resumed his place.

‘Transmit those coordinates to the fleet, Taro, and have everyone lock on. I want an almost simultaneous jump and exodus.’

Taro looked at the coordinates and his face paled. ‘Supremo, we *can’t*! It’s suicide. .’

The Doctor put a hand on his shoulder. ‘I trusted you, Taro.

Now you trust me.’

Taro turned back to his controls, sitting up very straight.

‘Supremo.’

He looked, thought Peri, like someone who knew he was going to die and was determined to do it heroically.

She looked at the Doctor and whispered, ‘Doctor, what –’

He waved her to silence.

Taro’s voice again. ‘Fleet locked on to jump coordinates.

Stand by.’

A brief, tense silence, then, ‘Entering hyperspace – now!’

The nauseating *shifting* sensation yet again.

It began to fade – and then returned full force.

‘Emerging from hyperspace – now!’

Then the Doctor’s harsh voice. ‘This is the Supremo.

General fleet action! Engage! Engage! Engage!’

Suddenly the scanner screens were filled with spaceships, hurling fiery streaks of light. A ship exploded, then another and another...

Morbius stared at his scanner screens in astonishment. ‘What the hell’s happening?’ he screamed.

There was something very like admiration in Grimoire’s voice. ‘He *jumped* Marshal! He jumped *through* us, just beyond us.

He’s cut us off from Karn.’

Morbius studied the chaos on his scanner screens. Confused and disorientated, his fleet was getting very much the worst of the engagement.

‘We’ll lose half the bloody fleet if things go on like this!’ He leaned forward and screamed into the com-unit. ‘Disengage!’

Disengage! Return to long-range geo-stationary orbit and regroup.’

‘They’re retreating, Supremo,’ said Taro exultantly.

‘Not for long, I fancy,’ said the Doctor. ‘Still, it buys us a little time.’ He spoke into the com-unit. ‘This is the Supremo!’

General fleet order, prepare for planetary landfall. Use Castle spaceport. Immediately upon landing, all units will disembark and deploy to form a close and secure perimeter around the castle.’ He paused. ‘My congratulations to you all on the recent fleet action. We have dealt the enemy a savage blow, but we’re still outnumbered and we still have a battle on our hands. And we all know where battles are won – on the ground! Supremo out.’ He turned to Taro. ‘There’s a pretty large courtyard in the centre of that castle complex. Do you think you could put us down there?’

Taro’s face was alight with the exultation of victory.

‘I could put her down on a Denali minim, Supremo.’

'I believe you could, Taro. Congratulations, you did very well.'

'With respect, you're the one who deserves congratulations, Supremo.' He shook his head. 'That second jump – I didn't think it was possible. It *shouldn't* have been possible.'

The Doctor grinned. For a moment, thought Peri, he looked like his old self again.

'Don't worry Taro,' he said solemnly. 'I won't make a habit of it! Now, take us down!' He turned to Peri. 'Maybe you'd better stay on board. Things may still be a bit tricky down there.'

'Bullshit!' said Peri, provoking shocked looks all round.

The looks disappeared when the Supremo smiled.

'I take it you want to come with us?'

'Damn right,' said Peri. 'You're talking to a cut-throat guerrilla leader, remember. They used to call me the Scourge of Sylvana. Somebody get me a hand-blaster, a laser-rifle – and a knife!'

Lord Delmar was disposing of his third slice of roast boar – and Hawken still wrestling with his first – when the com-unit in the corner crackled into life.

'Guard Captain to Commander Hawken! Guard Captain to Commander Hawken!'

With a muttered apology, Hawken jumped up and ran to the unit.

'Commander Hawken here.'

'There's been some sort of space battle sir,' said the voice from the unit. 'A second fleet turned up and clobbered the one that was bombarding us. Now it's landing, the second fleet, I mean. What do we do?'

'Nothing till I get there,' ordered Hawken. 'On my way.' He turned to Lord Delmar who was placidly wiping up his boar gravy with a chunk of bread. 'Have to go, I'm afraid, my lord.'

Things seem to be happening.'

'You'll miss pudding!'

‘Can’t be helped,’ said Hawken, and ran from the room.

A chunk of masonry, weakened by the recent bombardment, dropped from the ceiling, missing Lord Delmar by centimetres.

He brushed the dust from his shoulders, pushed back his empty plate and looked for the servant girl. She was crouching in the corner, almost hysterical with fear.

‘Come along, my dear,’ said Lord Delmar encouragingly.

‘What have we got for pudding?’

As Hawken ran along the castle corridors, the air was suddenly filled with the thunder of retro-rockets. Hawken followed the sound to the main courtyard, where he was astonished to see an enormous spaceship emblazoned with a giant golden ‘A’, settling to rest.

He joined the nervous party of armed guards watching the landing.

‘Surely they must be friends, sir?’ whispered the Guard Captain. ‘I mean, they chased off the fleet that was bombarding us.’ ‘They might be friends,’ said Hawken cautiously. ‘Or the more successful of two rival groups of enemies. Keep them covered and don’t take any chances.’

They watched as the landing ramp was lowered. Two black-clad figures appeared at the top of the ramp. To his astonishment, Hawken saw that one was his old friend Smith, got up in some kind of fancy military uniform. The other was his companion, the girl Peri. She too looked very warlike. She wore black overalls, a belt with holstered blaster and fighting knife, and had a laser-rifle slung over her shoulder.

Behind them came two enormous gorilla-like creatures. They wore rough leather jerkins and carried massive blaster-rifles.

Followed by their strange attendants, the Doctor and Peri came down the ramp.

Commander Hawken came forward to greet them. ‘Smith, my old friend! And Peri! Welcome back to Karn!’

Peri nodded towards the squad of castle guards with their levelled blaster-rifles. ‘Your welcoming party doesn’t look too friendly.’

‘What? Oh, at ease men, they’re friends. Very old friends.’

He shook hands with them both. ‘I take it that was Morbius you saw off for us?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘The seeing-off was only temporary, I’m afraid. We mauled his fleet a bit, but we couldn’t destroy it. I imagine he’ll try a ground attack next time. Now, I must make a quick tour of inspection and check the situation with my staff officers, then we’ll have a conference.’ He marched off, barking orders into a wrist-com. ‘Supremo to Staff, Supremo to Staff.’

Complete the disposition of your forces on the perimeter, then rendezvous in Castle Karn. Supremo out.’

‘Smith, wait!’ called Hawken, but the Doctor had gone, followed by one of the gorilla-like bodyguards.

‘You’ll find he’s changed a bit,’ said Peri. ‘We both have.’

She hurried after the Doctor.

Hawken was about to follow the Doctor, when a huge, hairy hand gripped him by the collar and lifted him clean off his feet.

Commander Hawken was an unusually big and powerful man, but he found himself dangling as helplessly as a child.

Bloodshot eyes glared at him out of an ape-like face.

‘Not *Smith*,’ said the monster reprovingly. ‘*Supremo*! Show respect!’

‘Right,’ said Hawken faintly. ‘I’ll remember that.’

Returning him gently to the ground, the creature strode off after Peri.

As the Doctor crossed the half-ruined castle hall, a black-robed figure emerged from the shadows. It was Maren.

‘So!’ she said accusingly. ‘You bring fire and slaughter to Karn!’

‘I didn’t bring evil here,’ said the Doctor. ‘I followed it. I intend to destroy it if I can. Will you help me?’

‘Your petty squabbles are no concern of the Sisterhood,’ said Maren.

‘You’re wrong, Reverend Mother,’ said the Doctor. ‘Morbius will make

them your concern. He has come to Karn for your Elixir, and he means to have it.'

'He has tried,' said Maren fiercely. 'He sent one of his little ships against us – and where is it now? In burning fragments on the mountainside!'

'You destroyed *one* scoutship?' said the Doctor. 'And you think that makes you safe? Reverend Mother, Morbius has fifty scoutships. Can you destroy them all?'

'If need be, yes.'

'He has battle-cruisers in the sky and soon he will have men on the ground, mercenary killers, swarms of them. If they succeed in defeating us, they will turn their attentions to you.'

'They cannot harm us.'

'They can overwhelm you, kill you all and take your precious Elixir. And believe me, they will. Help us, Reverend Mother, for your own sakes. We are here to help you.'

'We do not need your help, nor will we give you ours. We have meddled too much in the affairs of the galaxy and it has brought us nothing but sorrow. From now on we look to ourselves. And mark this, stranger. Who comes to steal the Elixir of Life will find only death.'

Maren stepped back into the shadows and vanished.

'Silly old bat,' said Peri, who had heard the conversation from a discreet distance.

'She'll soon be a dead old bat, unless our luck holds,' said the Doctor. 'Ah well, I tried. Come on, Peri.'

The Ogron bodyguards were staring into the shadows with wide frightened eyes.

'Bad old woman,' grunted one of them.

'Witch!' agreed the other.

They hurried after Peri and the Doctor, staying close to them for safety.

Chapter Three

Assault-at-Arms

‘Once we were warned of Morbius’s plans, we evacuated the Hospice and stopped taking new patients,’ said Lord Delmar.

The promised conference was taking place in the room where Morbius had once made his evil plans – largely because it was one of the few rooms in the castle still undamaged.

Lord Delmar and Hawken sat at one end of the table, the Doctor and Peri at the other, two Ogron bodyguards behind them.

High Commander Aril, Battle-Major Streg and Vogar, the Ogron chief, sat on one side of the table. General Ryon and the Cyberleader sat on the other, one empty chair between them.

Carefully selected by Aril and Streg, it was an extra large chair.

‘Have all the patients gone?’ asked the Doctor. ‘What about the medical staff?’

‘Gone too, most of them. There were a few patients too ill to be moved. Doctor Solon insisted on staying to look after them. A few junior doctors and nurses stayed on as well.’

‘Very noble of them,’ said Peri.

To herself she thought, ‘Suspiciously noble, as far as Solon’s concerned. Doesn’t sound like him at all.’ She looked quickly at the Doctor, but he didn’t seem concerned. ‘Too much on his mind,’ she thought. ‘I’ll mention it later.’

The conference-room door opened, revealing a terrifying figure. Immensely tall, it was covered with scaly green hide, ridged and plated like that of a crocodile. It had a massive, helmet-like head with a lipless, scaly-skinned lower jaw and two huge eyes like black metal screens. Its enormous hands were like crude, powerful clamps.

It moved forward, ponderously yet smoothly, and its voice, when it spoke, had a hissing quality.

‘My apologies, Ssupremo, I had far to come. I have stationed my troops on a small peak overlooking the Castle. It provides a good vantage point. Besides, the cold mountain air suits them.’

The Doctor said, ‘Allow me to introduce Ice Lord Azanyr, another of my staff officers.’

Azanyr went to the vacant chair and settled cautiously into it.

Big as it was, it creaked beneath his weight.

‘Well, now we’re all here,’ said the Doctor. He delivered a brief summary of his campaign against the armies of Morbius, and of the events that had brought them both to Karn.

‘Why is he so keen to take this planet?’ asked Hawken.

‘He wants control of the Elixir,’ said the Doctor. ‘He has to have it, he’s promised it as a bribe to all his more important followers. Now he’s here, he’ll stay because I’m here. I’ve caused him considerable annoyance and he’s desperate for revenge.’ He paused. ‘Anyway, we’re here now and so is he – and we’ve got to deal with him. There’s no escaping the fact that we’re badly outnumbered. But Morbius leads an army of mercenaries, the scum of the galaxy. The quality of my army is vastly superior, and they fight for a cause.’

‘I think they fight for you, Supremo,’ said High Commander Aril.

‘Perhaps that too, a little. At all events, I think we can hold Morbius back – and with just a little luck we can defeat him.’

Hawken’s wrist-com beeped and he held it to his ear. He listened for a moment, then turned to the Doctor.

‘Smith –’ He looked quickly at the Ogron bodyguards. ‘Sorry Supremo.’

‘Yes?’

‘Morbius’s battle fleet is back in close orbit and they’re sending down assault craft. I think the battle’s about to begin.’

The Supremo rose and strode from the room, followed by his staff officers.

Peri stood with the Doctor and his Ogron bodyguards at the Castle gate and watched the assault craft drifting down like a swarm of killer bees. The castle stood in the middle of a sizeable rocky plateau. This would be the battleground.

As each craft touched down, its doors burst open, landing ramps

lowered and Morbius's mercenaries swarmed out, firing as they ran. Soon the air was filled with the thud of blaster-fire, the thud of field-cannon and the fierce crackle of laser-rifles.

Confident in their superior numbers, they didn't seem to have any sort of battle plan. Yet for every assault squad, Alliance soldiers seemed to rise out of the ground to check them.

'You seem to be more than ready for them,' said Peri.

The Doctor smiled. 'We were here first, Peri, and Aril and Streg and the others are all very professional. They've got every possible landing site covered, some of them in a crossfire. Come on!'

He set off at a run, Peri and the Ogron bodyguards behind him.

More by luck than judgement, two of Morbius's assault craft had landed very close together, on a rocky plain close to the castle gates. The Alliance forces, a group of Ryon's irregulars, were outnumbered, being driven back under heavy fire.

'They mustn't get through the perimeter,' shouted the Doctor. 'If they do, more will follow.' He ran into the middle of the beleaguered group, forcing his way to the front, Peri and the Ogrons behind him; 'Rally and hold!' he shouted. 'They mustn't pass!'

'It's the Supremo!' someone shouted.

Other voices took up the cry. 'Supremo! Supremo!'

The irregulars redoubled their efforts. Peri unslung her laser-rifle, found cover behind a rock and started picking off mercenaries one by one.

But it was the Ogrons who saved the day. Roaring ferociously, firing their massive blasters, they advanced upon the mercenaries. The very sight of them struck fear into the enemy.

When more Ogrons, led by Vogar, came up in support, the mercenaries turned and fled.

Peri saw a good deal of the battle that followed. She stayed close to the Doctor, and the Doctor seemed to be everywhere.

He moved around the perimeter line checking for weak points, ordering reinforcements just when they were needed.

Wherever he appeared, the cry of 'Supremo!' went up, and the Alliance troops fought harder.

One completely unexpected factor worked in their favour.

Morbius despised non-humanoid life forms, and his mercenaries were human, or humanoid, to a man. The very sight of any of the Doctor's varied assortment of alien allies seemed to unnerve them.

'Not that you can blame them,' thought Peri, as she watched Azanyr and his Ice Warriors smash through the mercenary ranks like walking tanks.

Then there were the Sontarans, fighting with savage, dedicated joy.

She saw Streg, eyes shining with the thrill of battle, lead a charge against a squad of mercenaries twice the size of his own, encouraging his troops with a hoarse cry of, 'Do you want to live forever? Die like Sontarans, damn you!' and driving the enemy back by the sheer fury of his attack.

She saw the Doctor run to his side, ignoring the blaster-bolts that sizzled around him.

'Good work, Battle-Major Streg,' he shouted, 'but keep your men back. If they chase a retreating enemy, they leave a gap for someone else to come through.'

'You heard the Supremo,' bellowed Streg. 'Back, you scum, and keep the line!'

The Doctor returned to her side. 'That's the trouble with Sontarans – they get carried away! Come on!'

They moved to another part of the perimeter, where High Commander Aril, calm and elegant in the chaos of battle, was wheeling and marching and countermarching his Draconians in a series of brilliant manoeuvres that left the enemy dazed and confused.

'Not so much mobility, High Commander,' shouted the Doctor. 'Keep the line! Keep the line! Never mind manoeuvres, go straight at 'em!'

Aril raised a long green hand in acknowledgement and shouted orders, pulling his troops into closer order.

'And *that's* the trouble with Draconians,' said the Doctor.

‘Sometimes they can get too tricky!’

‘Are we winning?’

The Doctor scanned the battlefield. ‘We’re holding our own.’

he said sombrely. He wiped his forehead. ‘This kind of battle is just plain hard pounding. We shall see who can pound the longest!’

His tone was cheerful and confident, but Peri could see the underlying worry. The soldiers of the Alliance were being brilliantly led, and they were fighting with incredible courage.

But, in the end, superior numbers must count. Peri could see, as could the Doctor, that the Alliance lines were being driven inexorably back.

Old Maren sat on her stone stool staring sightlessly into space.

She was not seeing the stone walls of the temple. Her spirit was hovering above the battle that raged around Castle Karn.

Her eyes came to life, and all at once she was back in the Temple. She beckoned to Ohica, who came at once to her side.

‘What is it, Reverend Mother?’

‘I have been considering the words of the stranger, the one called Smith. It is bitter to me to admit it, but his words were true. We cannot stand against the hordes of Morbius alone. We must aid his enemies to defeat him. Come, Sisters.’

She led them from the Temple.

As the battle raged on, strange misfortunes began to plague Morbius’s nearly victorious army. With victory almost theirs, things started to go horribly and mysteriously wrong.

A battalion commander was rallying his troops when he saw a wizened, black-clad crone peering at him from a nearby rock.

She stretched out a scrawny hand and a ray of light shot from a ring on her finger.

The commander fell to the ground in the midst of his panic-stricken troops.

‘I’m blind,’ he howled. ‘I’m blind...’

Elsewhere on the battlefield, vitally important section commanders fell dead when no blaster-bolt had touched them.

Inexplicable waves of panic spread through the mercenary ranks, making them flee for no reason. Men fell to the ground, howling in strange fits, or clutched their eyes, screaming that they couldn't see. Soldiers swung round and turned their weapons on their friends.

And all the time, black-robed figures flitted through the battle lines, appearing and disappearing like ghosts.

The weird psychic attacks unnerved the mercenaries, turning the certainty of victory into the fear of defeat. They began to fall back.

As they patrolled the perimeter, the Doctor and Peri became aware that something very strange was going on.

'What's happening to them, Doctor?' asked Peri.

The Doctor pointed to a black-robed figure standing brooding at the top of a half-ruined tower.

'I must have got through to old Maren after all!'

From the war room of his flagship, Morbius too observed the strange phenomena. 'It isn't fair!' he said petulantly. 'Those hags have joined in on the Supremo's side. The men are starting to crack, they'll break and run soon...'

'Maybe you should go down and rally them?' suggested Grimoire.

Morbius stared at him. 'Are you mad? My presence graces victories, not disasters.' He slammed a fist down on an instrument panel. 'Why don't they come? Why don't they come?'

Suddenly, they came. A fleet of battle-cruisers winked out of hyperspace. It was a small fleet but, as Morbius knew, it was crammed with mercenaries, new fresh troops. Morbius's great gamble had come off. It had cost him an empire but it was worth it. He hurried to the com-unit.

'Morbius to Force Two. Attack immediately. Attack! Attack!

Attack!'

Chapter Four

Defeat

The Doctor and Peri stood watching as the new wave of assault ships dropped out of the sky.

‘It’s not fair,’ said Peri, unconsciously echoing Morbius.

‘We’ve fought so long and hard – and now this! It’s just not fair!’

‘Well, of course it’s not fair,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s a battle, not a ball game! All the same, you’ve got to admit that it’s brilliant. Morbius is a military genius in his way.’

‘Terrific!’ said Peri bitterly. ‘I’d hate to get slaughtered by someone second rate! Where did all these reinforcements come from anyway?’

‘You know we didn’t liberate all the planets Morbius had conquered? He still had a dozen or so under his control?’

‘So?’

‘He’s given them up,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s the only possible answer. He’s withdrawn all the occupying forces and ordered them here.’

‘So his empire is finished? Now he’s got nothing?’

‘Nothing but victory. Trying to hang on to those planets would have cost him the war. Giving them up means he wins. It takes a great commander to see something like that.’

‘So we’re doomed.’

‘Let’s say things are looking a bit tricky,’ said the Doctor.

‘Come on, Peri. Never say die till you’re dead.’

‘In about ninety minutes by the looks of it,’ said Peri. She was determined that if it wasn’t to be victory, which seemed highly unlikely now, it would be death.

She was never going to be the prisoner of Morbius again.

In his secret laboratory Solon was toiling ceaselessly. He wheeled a complex arrangement of electronic equipment to one prone form after another, applied electrodes, threw power-switches, and watched as the ghastly, dead shapes twitched into life.

The revival process was perfected at last – well, almost – but it was taking too long. Some of the patched-together corpses revived too slowly, some would not stir at all. There was a danger that the force would be too small...

Solon heard the rumble of battle from afar. Morbius would win, of course, but it was vital that Solon's army of the dead make a contribution to the battle before it ended. Morbius must know what Mehendri Solon had achieved on his behalf.

Frantically, Solon worked on...

The Doctor was back amongst his weary troops, putting new heart in them.

'Morbius must have felt things were getting too easy for us, so he's brought in some new players. We saw off the first wave and we'll see these off too!'

Ragged cheers went up, and cries of, 'Supremo! Supremo!'

But there wasn't the heart in the cries that there had been before.

The battle followed its inevitable course.

The assault ships of Morbius's reinforcements landed – no easy task, since the rocky terrain around the castle was now littered with assault craft. But land they did somehow, and wave upon wave of mercenaries flooded out to join Morbius's troops.

Old fears forgotten, Morbius's tired soldiers surged forward with their new and unwearied allies.

'What about the Sisterhood?' asked Peri as she followed the Doctor around the perimeter.

'I'm afraid they may have shot their psychic bolt,' said the Doctor. 'These supernatural stunts take it out of you. They'll need time to recover their energies and by then...'

The battle went on and on, prolonged mostly by the fact that the Alliance troops fought like heroes. But it was like trying to hold back the sea. Gradually the perimeter circle became smaller and smaller, until the Alliance forces were clustered tightly around the castle.

'It's the end,' thought Peri. 'They'll make one last charge and it'll all

be over.'

Morbius preened himself as he studied the scene on his scanners.

He looked in the nearest mirror and adjusted his sash.

'Now I'll go down and rally them. Contact the field commanders, and order a general ceasefire!'

'You're going to let them surrender?' asked Grimoire, surprised.

'No, I'm going to kill them all, of course. But I might offer them a little hope first, just for the fun of it. It's always nice to savour the moment, don't you think? I don't want to *hurry* my revenge. Have my scoutship made ready. We'll go down together, Grimoire, it'll be a little treat for you.'

Gradually the forces of Morbius stopped firing, and a mercenary captain came forward to where the Doctor and Peri stood by the main entrance. He held up a grimy white flag.

'Marshal Morbius offers a ceasefire. He wishes to parley.'

'Very well,' said the Doctor.

He had no hope that any good would come of it, but it would give his weary troops a few moments of rest.

The mercenary retired. The Doctor beckoned to the nearest Alliance soldier, one of Ryon's men. 'Find my staff officers and tell them to use the time. Food and water for the men, energy re-charge for the Sontarans, power-packs replaced, fresh ammunition supplies, dead and wounded dealt with, anything they can think of. Tell them to join me here when it's done.'

'Supremo!' The soldier sped away.

An uneasy silence fell. The Alliance survivors formed a tight circle around the castle. In front of them was a wide circle of bare and rocky terrain. No man's land.

On the far side of the circle were the hordes of Morbius, relaxed and confident now. You could see the dirty faces, the stubbly chins and the wolfish grins of anticipation.

'What's all this about, Doctor?' whispered Peri.

‘I think Morbius wants to come down for a bit of a gloat.’

‘Why accept the offer of a ceasefire?’

‘Why not? Gives us all a bit of a breather.’

They waited, and after a time the staff officers came to join them.

The Doctor looked sharply at them. ‘You got my orders?’

Ryon nodded. ‘All under way, Supremo. Matter of fact, it was all under way *before* we got your orders.’

The Doctor smiled wearily. ‘I should have known.’

‘What is happening, Supremo?’ asked High Commander Aril.

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Who knows? Morbius seems to want a little chat with us.’ A thought struck him. ‘He may offer surrender terms – not to me but perhaps to the rest of you.’

‘Never!’ growled Battle-Major Streg. ‘Sontarans do not surrender!’

The Doctor held up his hand. ‘If he does, I can’t advise you to accept.’

‘Why not?’ asked Peri. ‘If he’s willing to let them live –’

‘Morbius doesn’t take prisoners, Peri. Surrender to him means that instead of dying in battle you get yourself executed –

probably after some rather unpleasant preliminaries.’ He looked round the little group. ‘I’m sorry to have brought you all to this.’

‘Our choice, I reckon, Supremo,’ said Ryon laconically.

The Cyberleader said, ‘It has been an excellent battle.’

‘No need for apologies, Supremo,’ said Streg. ‘The next best thing to a glorious victory is a glorious death in battle.’

‘We shall fight to the last,’ said Aril enthusiastically. ‘We shall be legends!’

‘Swell,’ thought Peri. ‘The only trouble with being a legend is you have to be dead first!’

Echoing her thought, Azanyr hissed, ‘It will be a great honour to die

with you, Ssupremo!’

Vogar, the Ogron chief said, ‘Better kill Morbius first!’

Suddenly Peri said, ‘Look! More of them!’

More battle-cruisers had appeared in the sky, more assault craft were drifting down.

‘Not taking any chances, is he?’ said Peri.

‘Well, as one of your countrymen said in the American Civil War, “What matters is who gets there fustest with the mostest!”

Besides, it won’t make any real difference now. You can’t be more outnumbered than outnumbered.’

‘Where are they going?’ asked Peri.

Instead of trying to land close to Morbius’s other assault craft, the new ships were dropping out of sight lower down the mountainside.

‘No landing room round here any more,’ said the Doctor casually. ‘There’s a plateau not too far down, they can touch down there.’

‘It’ll take them some time to climb back up here and join in,’

said Peri.

‘Not that it matters,’ she thought to herself. ‘Morbius doesn’t need them. By the time they get here it’ll all be over.’

An elegant little silver scoutship drifted down out of the sky and landed on the strip of no man’s land, dangerously close to Morbius’s men. The landing ramp came down and Morbius appeared, gorgeous in bright blue, scarlet and gold. Peri thought she caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure lurking in the doorway behind him.

The mercenaries raised a cheer and Morbius waved a hand in gracious acknowledgement.

He surveyed the scene with immense satisfaction. Victory was clearly his – even without the tardy reinforcements whose late arrival had mildly surprised him. Still, better late than never, he thought, dismissing them from his mind.

Morbius strode majestically down the ramp. The shadowy figure,

whatever it was, stayed in the ship.

At the bottom of the ramp his captains clustered around him and Morbius gave each one a gracious word. Then, waving aside would-be bodyguards, he began walking across the neutral ground between them – alone.

It was a piece of theatre of course. Morbius knew that he was in no danger, that the Doctor wouldn't harm him during a ceasefire. But, thought Peri, it was quite effective. The rays of the late sun glinted on his scarlet sash and gold epaulettes as he strode towards them.

'Really, Doctor,' said Peri severely, 'you might have made an effort.'

He looked down at his dusty black uniform and grinned. For a moment he was the old Doctor again.

'Sorry, Peri, been a bit busy. Besides, it's hopeless trying to keep up with Morbius in the sartorial department.'

Morbius came to a halt and surveyed the battle-worn group on the castle steps.

The Doctor, Peri beside him, was flanked by his Ogron body- guards.

Grouped around them, the tall, elegant form of Aril, the squat shape of Streg, the towering figure of Azanyr, the tall silver Cyberleader and the lean, shabby Ryon.

Morbius shook his head. 'A motley assortment – all the odds and ends of the galaxy. Apart from the girl there's only one respectable humanoid in the lot.'

'Puts us ahead of you, Marshal,' drawled Ryon. 'Ain't none of your collection of scum could rightly be called human.'

Morbius's eyes flashed with anger, but he made no reply.

He turned to the Doctor. 'So we meet again, Smith! I beg your pardon – Supremo!' He bowed elaborately.

'Greetings, Morbius! I beg your pardon – Marshal Morbius, no, *Emperor* Morbius.' He bowed even more elaborately than had Morbius and added, 'Marshal of a pack of mad dogs, and Emperor of – nothing!'

Morbius looked round the battlefield, at the strewn rubble from the

ruined castle, the dead and dying, the wounded being carried away.

‘Empires lost can be re-conquered – but death is final.

Victory is mine, Smith, admit it.’

‘Your victory has cost you dear, Morbius. It will cost you dearer still before this day is over.’

‘Nothing that I am not willing to pay,’ said Morbius confidently ‘Between ourselves, what does it matter how many of these scum I lose? I can always buy more. And with the Elixir of Life in my hands – the greatest bribe in the galaxy – my empire will soon rise again.’ He looked arrogantly at the little group around the Doctor. ‘The rest of you haven’t much to say.’

‘The Supremo speaks for all,’ said Aril.

Morbius stared insolently at Peri. ‘You seem remarkably uninfected.’

‘I always was,’ said Peri. ‘That was a lie to trick a fool.’

‘I think I’ll order you taken alive,’ said Morbius thoughtfully.

‘It will please my men. Once I tire of you, you’ll enjoy a remarkably active social life.’ His glance swept around the little group. ‘I want your Supremo’s head – on a pole at the castle gate. As for the girl, I want all of her. The rest of you I am prepared to offer quarter – if you and your troops surrender now.’

Nobody moved or spoke. After a moment, Morbius said,

‘Very well. But I advise you not to be taken alive. Those that die will be the lucky ones.’

‘I think you’ve spewed out quite enough filth for now,’ said the Doctor. ‘Just go away, Morbius. The ceasefire ends when you reach your lines.’

Morbius turned and walked away from them.

‘Listen, all of you,’ said the Doctor urgently. He issued rapid orders and the staff officers hurried away.

Morbius strolled insolently slowly across the open space and was eagerly greeted by his mercenaries.

‘What happened, Marshal?’ one of them asked.

‘Nothing. I offered some of them quarter, but they refused.

We’ll kill them all anyway, but it’s easier if they surrender –’

Morbius broke off as he realised the man wasn’t listening.

He was staring over his shoulder.

‘Look, Marshal,’ said the mercenary hoarsely.

Morbius turned – and saw the massed forces of the Alliance charging straight towards him.

Chapter Five

Victory

Reassured by the fact that they had just been reinforced, with, apparently, still more reinforcements on the way, Morbius’s mercenaries felt the battle was as good as over. The Alliance’s desperate charge hit them like a hammer blow. Three hammer blows in fact since, following the Doctor’s orders, the charge had split into three, driving wedges into the mass of the enemy, splitting them up into smaller, more manageable groups.

If the battle had ended as it was expected to, the Alliance’s last fight would indeed have become a legend.

Ice Warriors hit the mass of the enemy like living tanks, driving them apart by sheer weight, blasting them down with their sonic weapons.

Streg’s Sontarans fought in small, compact units, sending a withering blaster-fire all around them, so they seemed unstoppable from any angle.

Aril and his Draconians weaved in and out of the battle like phantoms, never where you expected them to be, always returning fire with deadly effect.

Cybermen, uninspired but unstoppable, drove straight through the enemy, turned and drove back again.

Ryon and his hunters crawled from place to place, using every scrap of cover, dropping a mercenary with every shot.

Vogar's Ogrons rampaged through the battle like creatures from a nightmare, shooting down their enemies with massive blasters. When the power-packs failed they used the blaster-rifles as clubs, or snapped necks with their enormous hands.

The courage and dash of the Alliance forces should have won them the battle, but of course it didn't.

The reinforced mercenaries were just too many, and however many you killed, there were always more – and more behind them.

Gradually the old situation re-established itself. The Alliance troops in a tight cordon around the castle, and the mercenaries pressing ever closer.

The Doctor was considering tactics for a fight through the ruined castle. There would be Hawken and his guards for reinforcement. Hawken had refused to commit his men to the general battle, insisting that his duty was to defend Lord Delmar and Castle Karn. Well, the battle would move inside the Castle quite soon.

The Doctor was also considering, quite dispassionately, methods for killing both Peri and himself before the final collapse. It was inconceivable to let either of them be captured alive by Morbius. The Doctor realised he had gone through the battle without a weapon. He stepped over the body of a dead mercenary and saw a fighting knife on the man's belt. He wrenched the knife from the belt and tucked it carefully inside his tunic. He looked around. Where was Peri, anyway? Perhaps she had already been killed.

It suddenly struck him that he'd literally forgotten the TARDIS, still here in Hawken's custody. He realised how much he'd changed. If he could regain the TARDIS, he could save Peri and as many of his troops as could reach it...

Filled with new hope, the Doctor returned to the battle.

Peri was very much alive. She had disappeared into the fighting, but suddenly she was back at his side.

'Doctor, something's happening on the far side of the battle, beyond the mercenaries' perimeter. I can hear shouting and shots, blaster-fire and projectile weapons. Some of the mercenaries are turning and shooting the other way.'

The Doctor stared at her. Then he said, 'Come on!' and sprinted for the

ruins of the west tower. Only half of it had been blown away, and the Doctor shinned up the surviving half like a chimpanzee. Peri followed and the Ogron bodyguards swarmed up behind them.

Perched on the highest possible vantage point, the Doctor and Peri surveyed the battlefield. They could see over the heads of the Alliance troops, over the mercenaries to the very edge of the rocky plateau on which the castle stood.

Something extraordinary was happening. Men were scrambling over the edge of the plateau, hordes of them. Some wore formal city clothes, others the rough working garments of hunters or farmers. There was an assortment of uniforms, militiamen, police, territorial units. Peri even thought she saw the grey uniforms of the Freedonian troops who had hunted her on Sylvana. But surely Freedonia was allied with Morbius...

The newcomers' arms were as varied as the clothes they wore. Those in uniform mostly had up-to-date laser-rifles and blasters, but the others carried blasters of old-fashioned design or projectile weapons. Some only had swords and pikes and even scythes. And they kept on coming, row after row of them hurling themselves on the astonished mercenaries from behind.

The effect was devastating. Caught between the swarming newcomers and the still-formidable ranks of the Alliance, the mercenaries panicked, broke and fled.

Some made for their assault craft, and one or two ships even managed to take off. Looking up, Peri saw that Morbius's battlecruisers had vanished from the skies. Their crews had seen their Master's defeat and made off.

Peri started to go down, but the Doctor put a hand on her arm. 'Let's watch from up here, Peri. Best seats in the house.'

'Shouldn't we go down and help?'

'They don't need our help now. It's as good as over.'

He saw the disappointed faces of the Ogrons and said, 'You two can go if you like, I don't need guarding any more. You might as well get in a bit of fighting before it's all finished.'

The Ogrons showed their yellow fangs in a savage grin and bounded gleefully down the side of the tower. The Doctor and Peri watched the

end of the battle. It didn't take long.

Outnumbered and overwhelmed, the mercenaries fled, died or surrendered.

It was over.

As they started to climb down, Peri brushed against the Doctor and felt something hard and angular beneath the Doctor's dusty black tunic.

'Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?'

The Doctor looked baffled. 'What?'

'Old Earth joke. What is it?'

The Doctor took the knife from inside his pocket and showed her.

She frowned. 'What are you doing with that thing?'

'I thought it might make a nice souvenir – but I don't think I'm going to need it any more.' He tossed the knife spinning into the ruins 'Come on, Peri, let's see what's going on.'

When Peri and the Doctor appeared before the Castle a great roar of 'Supremo! Supremo! Supremo!' went up.

Aril rushed up and actually embraced him, an unheard-of display of public emotion for a Draconian.

'Victory, Supremo, victory! A brilliant strategic stroke!'

'I quite agree,' said the Doctor, gently disengaging himself.

'And I know whose it was!' Suddenly he saw a familiar face. 'And there he is!'

He moved towards a tubby balding man who wore the dark shiny suit of an official, combined, somewhat incongruously, with a broad leather belt with holstered blaster and sheathed fighting knife.

He was issuing brisk orders to a group of similarly dressed younger men. At the sight of the Doctor he broke off and hurried to meet him, beaming widely.

'Supremo! This is a great honour!'

‘The honour is all mine, President Makir.’

‘I’m so glad we arrived on time.’

‘Believe me, so am I! To be honest, I didn’t really think you were coming.’

Makir looked hurt. ‘After all you’ve done for us? My daughter brought you my message, didn’t she? We rounded up every available man and gun and ship, and here we are! As you can see, people from many of the other planets you freed decided to join us..’

Peri, too, had seen an old friend – or rather, an old enemy.

‘It’s Commandant Nadir, isn’t it?’

The grey-haired, grey-uniformed man swung round. He stared at her.

‘Surely, it’s Peri? The guerrilla leader? The Scourge of Sylvana.’

Peri regarded him suspiciously, hand close to her knife.

‘Last time we met we were on opposite sides.’

‘A sad mistake,’ said Nadir. ‘When the army occupied Sylvana we were acting under the orders of our government, who had chosen to ally our world with Morbius.’

‘What made you change sides?’

‘We did not know, until your Supremo told us, that our corrupt President, and his equally corrupt government, had been bribed into joining Morbius with the promise of untold loot and eternal life. The Supremo treated us honourably, took our parole and allowed us to return home. He also told us a great deal about Morbius and his motives.’

‘I still don’t see –’

‘Some of us decided that the alliance with Morbius was a mistake. When we got back to Freedonia we removed the government and set up a new one. And when we heard the Supremo was in military difficulty, we saw it as an opportunity to make amends.’ He smiled. ‘I’m glad I didn’t shoot you. I hope we can be friends now.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ said Peri slowly. ‘I’m grateful for your help here, but I lost a lot of friends back on Sylvana..’

'I too lost friends – and soldiers and guards. I had a promising young officer, Lieutenant Hakon, a trifle impulsive I admit. He died in very mysterious circumstances.'

'Well, war is hell,' said Peri. 'Maybe we'd better let bygones be bygones.'

They shook hands.

'But how did you all get here together?' asked the Doctor.

'Your colleague assisted us,' said Makir. 'He sent round the messages saying you needed help, provided transport and weapons where necessary, coordinated the entire operation. His name is –'

'I know his name,' said the Doctor.

The Time Lords, he thought, were always very good at getting others to do their killing – and their dying – for them.

An imperious voice called from the top of the castle steps.

'Doctor!'

The Doctor turned and saw Borusa, with Ratisbon beside him. 'Doctor, where is Morbius?'

'Around here somewhere. He's swanking about in a sky-blue uniform covered with gold braid. You can't miss him.'

'He must be found,' said Ratisbon testily. 'The capture of Morbius is the whole point of this operation. Where is he?'

Suddenly the Doctor realised that Reverend Mother Maren was beside him.

She pointed. 'He is there!'

A shabby figure wearing a mercenary's rough cloak was climbing the ramp of Morbius's scoutship.

'Stop him,' shouted Borusa.

Morbius cast off the cloak and stood revealed in his blue and gold glory. He raised a hand in a derisive gesture of farewell.

Maren pointed a skinny finger and screamed, 'Die, thief!'

A ray of light shot from the ring on Maren's finger, just as the Doctor tried to knock her hand aside. He only half-succeeded and the ray brushed the side of Morbius's head.

He screamed and pitched down the ramp, lying huddled at its foot.

The Doctor and Peri ran across to the body and the Doctor knelt to examine it.

'Stunned, not dead,' he said.

'Why did you save him?'

'It wasn't time for him to die.'

Borusa and Ratisbon came hurrying over.

'Is he dead?' snapped Borusa.

'No.'

'Good. We need him alive.'

Peri stared at him. 'Why?'

'So we can execute him!'

Ratisbon grabbed the arm of a passing soldier. 'Take the prisoner into the castle and put him under heavy guard. Better shackle him as well.'

Freeing his arm, the tall soldier, one of Ryon's men, looked down at Ratisbon with mild interest.

'Who's this turkeycock, Supremo?'

It was Ratisbon who answered. 'I am Councillor Ratisbon and this is a most important prisoner.' He turned to the Doctor.

'Have you no control over your troops? You will order this man to obey my instructions instantly.'

The soldier yawned and scratched his bristly chin.

'This guy bothering you, Supremo? Shall I boot his ass down the mountainside?'

For a moment the Doctor looked tempted, then he shook his head.

‘No. Better do as he says. Find Commander Hawken and hand the prisoner over to the Castle Guard. They’ve got facilities for locking people up. Ask Hawken from me to see he’s well guarded.’

Morbius’s unconscious body was carried away.

Later, much later, when it was dark, a black-cloaked figure slipped down the ramp of Morbius’s scoutship and made its way towards the castle.

Chapter Six

The Butcher’s Bill

The Doctor and Peri were standing at the top of the castle steps, watching the aftermath of battle. Prisoners were being marched away under guard, dead bodies were neatly piled up, and a handful of doctors and nurses had appeared from somewhere inside the castle to tend the wounded.

‘The only thing sadder than a battle lost is a battle won,’ said the Doctor.

‘Who said that?’

‘The Duke of Wellington. He wept when he saw the dead and wounded after Waterloo. I’m sick of war and battles and military glory, Peri. I want to go home. If I had a home...’

‘The TARDIS is here somewhere, isn’t it? Why don’t we find it and just leave?’

‘Soon, but not yet. I’ve got to see things through. Certain events have got to happen in the right order.’

‘Why?’

‘Because they already have.’

Before Peri could press him further, a Sontaran trooper marched up to them and saluted. ‘Battle-Commander Streg would like to see you, Supremo.’

‘Yes, of course. Tell him to come at once.’

‘He cannot come, Supremo. He is dying.’

They found Streg lying, eyes closed, in the wreckage of a shattered field-cannon and surrounded by dead mercenaries, with two Sontaran troopers standing guard.

The Doctor knelt beside him, gripping the stubby, gauntleted hand.

‘Streg!’

The little red eyes opened. ‘Supremo! I wanted to say farewell.’

‘I know you’re badly hurt, Streg, but there are doctors here.

Perhaps they can help you.’

‘No, Supremo, it is too late, I know. We Sontarans always know. I wanted to say goodbye – and to thank you.’

‘Thank me! For bringing you to this?’

‘You have brought me the greatest gift any Sontaran can ever have, Supremo: Two gifts. The honour of fighting in a legendary battle – and a glorious death.’

The red eyes closed.

Slowly the Doctor stood up. He turned to the Sontaran trooper who had brought the news.

‘How did this happen?’

‘The Battle-Major saw two mercenaries aiming a small field-cannon. He threw himself directly on the cannon and it exploded, killing the crew – and the Battle-Major as well.’

‘Where was the cannon being aimed?’

‘At you, Supremo. When you were on the ruined tower.’

The Doctor nodded, his face impassive.

‘You’ll see the body’s taken care of?’

‘It will be thrown in the burial pit with the others, Supremo.

It is not our Sontaran custom to concern ourselves with the bodies of the dead.’

‘Damn your customs! Battle-Major Streg will be buried with full military honours, and every soldier in the Alliance will attend.

See to it.’

‘It shall be so, Supremo.’

The Doctor turned away and saw Peri coming towards him, tears in her eyes.

‘Streg’s dead, Peri.’

‘I know, I heard. I was coming with you when I saw –

someone else.’

She led him to where a pale-faced, handsome young man, lay on his back, wide-open eyes staring at the darkening sky.

‘It’s Taro,’ said the Doctor incredulously. ‘He wasn’t even supposed to be fighting. The Denali were just hired to crew my flagship.’

‘I know,’ said Peri. ‘Taro smuggled himself off the ship. He got hold of a uniform and a blaster somewhere and joined Ryon’s people. He said he wanted to fight for you.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Streg died saving our lives.’ He bowed his head, accepting the burden of these two deaths, and of many others. Every unit of the Alliance forces must have sustained heavy losses.

‘There’s always a price to pay,’ he said. ‘In Nelson’s navy they called it the butcher’s bill.’

A slender figure ran towards them. It took them a moment to realise that it was Ensign Vidal – he was far from his usual immaculate self. His white uniform was blackened and bloodied, he had one arm in a sling and there was a bandage around his head.

He came to attention and saluted. ‘Congratulations upon a great victory, Supremo.’

‘Thank you,’ said the Doctor. ‘I suppose this isn’t the time to remind you that you were ordered to remain on the flagship?’

‘I couldn’t miss the battle, Supremo. I’m a soldier, after all.’

‘So you are – and the only member of the Capitol Guard to have done

any actual fighting in generations!’

‘Cardinal Borusa requests your immediate presence in the Great Hall of the Castle. A conference is to be held.’

‘Tell him I’ll be there when I’m ready.’

Vidal swallowed. ‘In those words, Supremo?’

‘In those words.’

Vidal turned and sped away.

‘*He’s* still full of martial enthusiasm,’ said Peri.

The Doctor nodded. ‘The young ones always are, they think they’re immortal. That’s why we go on having battles.’

‘Well,’ said Peri, ‘he was luckier than Taro.’

They turned and walked slowly towards the castle.

The Great Hall of the Castle was still impressive, even though its floor was strewn with rubble and part of its roof was now open to the sky.

Lord Delmar sat at one end of the great stone table, Borusa at the other, with the staff officers of the Alliance down one side, and Makir and the various commanders of the late-appearing volunteer force down the other.

The Doctor and Peri arrived last, largely because the Doctor, seemingly unconcerned by Borusa’s summons, had insisted on returning to his flagship for a meal, a bath and a change of uniform.

When he appeared, flanked once more by two Ogron bodyguards, Lord Delmar gave him a stately nod of welcome, and a rather battered-looking Hawken a friendly wave.

Everyone else, except for Borusa and Ratisbon, rose to their feet.

‘Supremo!’ they roared.

Cheers, wild applause and shouts of congratulation filled the hall. Smiling, the Doctor bowed his thanks and waved them back to their seats.

He held up his hand for silence.

‘You are late, Doctor,’ snapped Ratisbon.

‘No, you are early. This conference begins when I say it begins and not before.’

The Doctor walked to where Borusa sat beside Ratisbon at the head of the table.

‘I think you are in my place.’

‘You are insolent, Doctor,’ snapped Borusa. ‘May I remind you that you are operating under the authority of the High Council, and that we are its representatives?’

‘Precisely,’ said Ratisbon waspishly. ‘You no longer command here, Doctor.’

‘Do I not?’ said the Doctor.

His voice was soft, but there was something in it that made Peri shiver. He was all Supremo now. He looked along the side of the table that held his officers.

‘Lord Azanyr, would you be good enough to kill Borusa and Ratisbon for me? Cardinal Borusa first, I think, in deference to his rank.’

The terrifying figure of Azanyr rose to his feet, his colossal armoured bulk dominating the great table.

‘It will be a pleasure, Sssupremo.’

Azanyr raised his great clamp-like hands, aiming his sonic weapons at the Time Lords.

Borusa sat stiff-backed in his chair, glaring defiantly at the Ice Warrior.

It was Ratisbon who croaked, ‘Supremo – no, please!’

‘Hold, Lord Azanyr,’ said the Doctor. ‘Later, perhaps.’

Ratisbon rose hurriedly, took Borusa’s arm and led him to two empty seats at the end of the table. The Doctor and Peri took the two vacant places.

Even now Borusa made an attempt to impose his authority.

‘We shall begin by discussing the most urgent item on the agenda, the disposition of the war criminal Morbius.’

‘We shall do no such thing,’ said the Doctor from the head of the table. ‘We shall begin by discussing the welfare of the troops under my command. Their casualties, their current strength, arrangements made for food, accommodation and eventual return home. Morbius can wait.’

‘Really, Doctor,’ spluttered Borusa.

‘Interrupt once more and I shall have you removed.’ He turned to his officers. ‘Now, gentlemen, let me thank you for the great heroism shown in today’s battle. Let me also thank our new allies, whose timely arrival saved the day.’

More cheers and general congratulations.

While Borusa seethed at the end of the table, the Doctor listened to a long series of reports from his staff officers.

Casualties amongst Alliance forces had been heavy, with the more vulnerable humanoids suffering most. Casualties amongst the late-arriving volunteers were, on the whole, light. Lord Delmar and Hawken were arranging for medical care, food and barrack accommodation for the survivors.

As the reports went on, Ratisbon turned to Borusa. ‘We have created a monster!’ he whispered.

‘Or the greatest potential Lord President in Time Lord history,’ said Borusa quietly.

Ratisbon shuddered. ‘I think I’d sooner have Morbius!’

Satisfied that everything possible was being done for his troops, the Doctor turned at last to Borusa.

‘Now then, Junior Cardinal Borusa, any other business?’

Speak up!’

Choking back his rage, Borusa said, ‘It has been determined by the High Council, with the gracious consent of Lord Delmar, that Morbius shall be tried and executed here on Karn.’

‘Give him a fair trial and then hang him!’ said the Doctor.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘You said tried and executed. Foregone conclusion?’

‘Really, Doctor, are you expecting an acquittal?’

‘Why don’t you take him back to Gallifrey and deal with him?’ asked Peri.

‘These painful matters are best dealt with quickly.’ Borusa waved towards the leaders of the late-arriving volunteers.

‘Fortunately, all the witnesses we need are already here. The trial will take place at eleven a.m., galactic standard time, here in this hall.’ He rose. ‘If the meeting will excuse me, I will finalise the arrangements.’

Borusa and Ratisbon left and the meeting broke up.

‘It still seems strange that they don’t take him back to Gallifrey,’ said Peri.

‘They daren’t,’ said the Doctor. ‘Too many secret supporters on the High Council. Back on Gallifrey, he might still pull off a nifty *coup d’état*. They want him dead and forgotten and far away

– and as soon as possible.’

Nobody noticed when a grimy, white-coated figure arose from its hiding place behind a pile of rubble, slipped through a new-made crack in the wall and scuttled off down the castle’s endless corridors.

‘Eleven tomorrow,’ muttered Mehendri Solon. ‘I will save you, Master, I will save you. It is not too late...’

Obsessed with his mission, Solon failed to notice the black-cloaked figure that followed him through the darkness.

Chapter Seven

Trial

There was a party in the ruins of Castle Karn that night, a riotous party that spread through the ruined halls and barrack rooms, and spilled out into the courtyards, where great bonfires were lit.

There was no shortage of food and drink. Hawken had donated most of the supplies in the castle commissary and a good deal of his private,

customs-confiscated supply of liquor.

Lord Delmar had contributed generously from his stock of fine food and wines. He was, he told the Doctor, planning to leave Castle Karn for one of his estates on a peaceful rural planet.

‘Shan’t be sorry,’ he confided. ‘Felt I had to stay on while the old place was still a going concern, family duty and all that.

Never liked it really, draughty old pile.’

It had been decided that Castle Karn was to be evacuated –

the Hospice was at an end. Most of the staff had already left, and the others were keen to go. The damage done in the bombardment was simply too great, and nobody had the heart, or the funds, to rebuild.

The party was a farewell, as well as a celebration. The only thing in short supply was female company, although Peri and a handful of hospital nurses did their best to fill the gap.

Most of the partying was done by humans, of course. Ice Warriors and Cybermen aren’t really party animals.

Apart from killing their enemies, the Sontarans’ idea of a good time was drinking appallingly strong liquor until the weakest fell over, and continuing the game until only one, the winner, was left standing. They’d been investigating the castle’s liquor supplies with steady determination but had found nothing nearly as effective as their native *vrag*.

For Draconians, a really good party consists of sipping tiny glasses of exquisite liqueurs, and exchanging witty and poetic epigrams, so this wasn’t really their kind of occasion.

They stood chatting amongst themselves, watching the riotously revelling humans with mild bemusement.

‘A strange species these humans,’ said one of Aril’s captains, watching some of Ryon’s men perform a vigorous square dance.

‘Indeed,’ said Aril. ‘Yet not unendearing when you get to know them.’

The Doctor moved through the party, greeted with cries of

‘Supremo!’ and ‘To Victory!’ and offers of drinks wherever he went.

He found himself in conversation with a mildly tipsy Hawken, and asked where he'd got his collection of bruises and the blaster-scar on his forehead.

'We may not have been in your famous battle, Doctor, but we had quite a lively time. The mercenaries kept sending in infiltrators so they could take over the castle and attack you from the rear. We kept them out, though – all but one or two. My lads have reported someone in a white robe, and someone else in a black cloak skulking about. Can't seem to lay their hands on them, though... Never mind – have another drink!'

The sounds of distant revelry reached Morbius, sitting on the bunk in a cell once occupied by the Doctor. He had recovered consciousness to find himself blind and a prisoner. The blindness had worn off and he had been given a decent meal and a passable wine, but he was still in chains and in a locked cell.

He sat upright, his mind turning over the events of the past and making plans for the future.

He was Morbius, he could never be defeated.

In his secret laboratory, still secret despite all that had happened, Solon was still working furiously. He threw the power switch and the last subject twitched.

'Rise,' ordered Solon, and the ghastly creature on the slab rose and shambled away.

Solon chose a largely undamaged torso and grabbed a leg, more or less at random, from a nearby pile. Reaching for an electronic surgical stitcher, he set to work at a frantic pace.

There was so little time...

It was sober, not to say hungover, group that assembled for the trial next morning.

Overnight the Great Hall had been transformed. The rubble had been cleared away, and there was a raised dais for the judges, a dock for the prisoner and row upon row of chairs for the spectators.

The Doctor, Peri, Lord Delmar and Hawken sat in a row of VIP seats at the front of the court.

There was a musical humming sound from outside the court.

A portly, black-robed Time Lord court usher entered the hall and boomed, 'All rise!'

The doors of the Great Hall were flung open and an impressive procession made its way into the hall.

Preceded by an escort of the Capitol Guard, colourful in their comic-opera uniforms, Lord President Saran strode into the hall. Behind him came Ratisbon and Borusa. All three wore the severe black and white robes of the Time Lord judiciary.

'Doing it in style,' the Doctor whispered.

'Sssh!' whispered Peri, impressed in spite of herself.

In solemn silence, the judges took their place on the bench, Saran in the centre, Ratisbon and Borusa on his left and right hand respectively.

The usher's booming voice called, 'Bring in the prisoner!'

More Capitol Guards escorted Morbius, still resplendent in his blue and gold uniform, into the hall and seated him in the dock.

'You are charged, Morbius, with War Crimes perpetrated against a variety of sentient races in the galaxy. How do you plead?'

Morbius's deep, mellow voice rang through the Great Hall.

'I do not *plead*, nor do I recognise the authority of this court.

I am Morbius, Lord High President of Gallifrey.'

'You were deposed.'

'By an illegal conspiracy. Now I am held prisoner by an illegal court. And who are my judges? A treacherous politician who conspired to ruin me. A snivelling spy who planted false evidence against me. The senile old fool who stole my high office. Continue with this charade if you must. I have no more to say.' Morbius sat back in his chair, folding his arms in disdain, dropping his noble head on his chest. For the rest of the trial he might have been asleep.

The trial began. Borusa, who seemed to be acting as prosecutor, called witness after witness from the rows of volunteers. All told much the

same story over and over until the sheer repetition of horrors became monotonous.

Peaceful communities invaded without provocation or warning by hordes of ravening mercenaries. Resistance ruthlessly crushed, with massacres, rape and torture commonplace. Land and property stolen, workers and farmers enslaved and worked to death to provide materials for Morbius's war machine.

The trial adjourned for an hour between one and two and then resumed.

More of the same, more tales of death and destruction.

Mercenaries and space pirates, giving evidence in the hope of saving their skins, told how Morbius and his agents had recruited them, luring them with seemingly limitless funds and promises of immortality.

'He told us we had no ambition,' said one unsavoury specimen. 'He said, "Why pirate cargo-ships or raid spaceports when you can steal whole worlds?" So that's what we did – till that bastard of a Supremo came along and ruined it all!'

The trial went on and on until, in late afternoon, Borusa called a halt.

'This trial could go on for many days, but we are agreed that we have heard enough. The judges will confer and then deliver their verdict. There will be a brief recess.'

The judges swept majestically out and there was a low hum of conversation.

'Hey, where's the jury?' asked Peri.

'This is a Time Lord trial,' said the Doctor. 'We don't have juries.'

'Why not?'

'You can't always rely on them to come up with the right result. Time Lord trials don't decide anything. They just confirm a decision that's already been taken.'

A bare ten minutes later the judges returned and took their places.

President Saran spoke for the first time. In his reedy old voice he said, 'Morbius, this bench of judges has found you guilty of a whole series

of appalling crimes. Have you anything to say?’

Morbius maintained a contemptuous silence.

‘The only possible sentence is death,’ said Saran. ‘Your body will be placed in the vaporisation chamber at midnight tonight.

Take him away.’

As Morbius rose, there came wild screams from outside the court and the erratic sounds of random blaster-fire.

The doors were flung open and a ghastly apparition shambled into the Great Hall. It was a soldier, or rather the remnants of several soldiers, roughly stitched together.

Fragments of rotting uniform covered rotting flesh, and dead eyes stared blankly from the dead face. It carried a rusty blaster which it waved unsteadily, firing random shots about the hall.

More zombie-like apparitions followed, lurching into the hall, while the seated spectators flung themselves away from them amongst the sound of crashing chairs.

Arms had been banned in the hall but not everyone had obeyed. One or two spectators produced blasters, but their fire had no effect.

A grimy, white-coated figure appeared at the back of the hall.

‘Run, Master, run!’ it screamed. ‘We can reach your ship.’

A sudden flare of hope in his eyes, Morbius leapt up, chains jangling.

One of the zombies lurched into him, nearly knocking him over. Morbius grabbed its arm to steady himself – and the arm came away in his hand. With a scream of horror, he flung the arm away from him and cowered back in the box.

The Doctor grabbed a chair and swung it at the nearest zombie. It struck the apparition’s head – and the head flew from the shoulders like a golf-ball from a tee. The creature staggered about headless, firing wildly, then its leg came off and it fell.

‘Never mind blasters,’ shouted the Doctor. ‘You can’t kill them, they’re already dead! Chairs! Use the chairs.’

The bolder spectators grabbed chairs and swung them, and there was

a brief and horrible combat. Under the chair-blows the zombies disintegrated, arms, legs and heads flying in all directions.

Soon it was over, the floor littered with limbs and torsos.

Horribly, some of them were still twitching, but eventually they became still.

Peri shuddered. 'That was worse than the battle!'

By now Hawken's castle guards were in the hall. They took charge of Morbius and seized Solon as he tried to flee.

As they dragged him past Morbius, Solon sobbed, 'Forgive me, Master. I tried, I tried.'

'Get away from me, you filthy little corpse-monger,'
screamed Morbius. 'I never want to see your face again.'

The Doctor glanced at the dais where the three Time Lord judges sat rigid with shock.

They saw Hawken escorting a clearly shaken Lord Delmar from the hall.

'Come on, Peri, let's get out of here.'

Picking their way between the litter of fast-decaying body parts, the Doctor and Peri made their way out of the Great Hall.

They passed a number of white-faced Capitol Guards.

'Those fancy-dress soldiers of yours weren't much use,' said Peri.

'The Capitol Guard?' The Doctor smiled. 'You must forgive them, Peri, they're not used to violence.'

They went outside the castle and stood on the steps, breathing in the crisp, cold night air.

'So what do we do now, Doctor?'

'Wait till midnight. Soon after that it will all be over and we can leave.'

'Are you attending the execution?'

‘I don’t want to Peri, but I must.’

‘Why?’

‘To make sure that everything goes precisely as it should.’

Chapter Eight

Execution

It was eleven o’clock and the Doctor was moving quietly along the darkened castle corridors. He wasn’t sure how he was going to do what he was going to do. He only knew that he had to do it. To be precise, he had to set Solon free.

A little earlier he had sought out Hawken and casually asked him where Solon had been imprisoned.

‘In your old cell, Doctor,’ said Hawken cheerfully. ‘Morbis had it for a while, but I was asked to move him closer to the execution chamber.’

‘I didn’t know you even had an execution chamber.’

‘We didn’t, but we do now. Your Time Lord judges brought it with them. Their technicians are setting it up now. Were you thinking of going to see him? Solon, I mean.’

‘I might.’

‘Well, be careful along those corridors. I lost a couple of my patrolmen last night.’

‘Mercenaries hiding out in the ruins?’

‘I suppose so. Only...’

‘Only what?’

‘The bodies were still fresh – and they’d been completely drained of blood.’

Using his Time Lord memory – a path once trodden is never forgotten – the Doctor retraced his steps to his old cell. He turned a corner and there it was. It even had his old guard sitting outside it.

The Doctor was considering his next move when someone made it for

him.

A black shape rushed like a whirlwind from the other direction and bore the guard to the ground. The guard's body jerked and was still.

The dark figure – it was wearing a black cloak – bent over the unconscious guard and arose with a bunch of keys. It opened the cell door and went inside.

Flattening himself against the wall, the Doctor edged closer to the open cell door. He heard a low sibilant voice.

‘You are a servant of Morbius? You tried to rescue him?’

Then Solon's frantic tones. ‘Yes, yes. I tried but I failed.

Who are you?’

‘I too serve Morbius.’

‘You must help me. I have a better plan now, one that cannot fail.’

A pause, then the sibilant voice said, ‘I will help you.’

‘First we must go to my laboratory: there are things I need for my plan. Then take me to Morbius.’

The Doctor ducked back as the two figures emerged.

The black-cloaked figure was saying, ‘He is in a cell next to the execution chamber. We must hurry, there is little time. He dies at midnight.’

‘Morbius will never die,’ said Solon. ‘Come.’

They hurried away down the corridor. The Doctor considered following them – but he already knew their final destination. He examined the unconscious guard, who was stunned not dead, and hurried back the way he had come.

In the execution chamber he found the technicians making final adjustments to their apparatus. It was simple enough, considering its sinister purpose. Just a transparent coffin-shaped container on a low table, connected to a bank of complex apparatus.

‘Is everything ready?’

The two technicians weren't too sure who the Doctor was.

But they had seen him on terms of intimacy with the Lord President and with Borusa, and they recognised the voice of authority. 'Yes, sir, just finished final checks.'

'And Morbius?'

'Next door, just round the corner under guard.'

'There's a connecting door, see,' said the second technician.

'Bring him through, put him inside, press that red button there...'

He pointed. '... And it's done.' He lowered his voice. 'If he kicks up a fuss we give him this.' He produced a disposable syringe in a glass case. 'Instant knockout.'

'I see,' said the Doctor. 'Show me.'

The technician handed him the syringe.

The Doctor put it in his pocket.

'Here, you can't do that.'

A deep voice growled, 'Supremo do what he wishes.'

The Doctor turned and saw his two Ogron bodyguards looming over him.

'Not good to come here without us, Supremo,' said one of them reproachfully.

'Commander say corridors not safe,' said the other. 'Blood-drinking creature hiding here.'

The Doctor felt as if he was in the charge of two giant, hairy nannies.

'I'm very glad to see you,' he said. 'Now, I want you to do something for me.'

'We die for Supremo,' said the first Ogron.

'No need for that,' said the Doctor. He indicated the two terrified technicians. 'Just take these two gentlemen away with you and – entertain them for a couple of hours.'

The Ogron looked puzzled. ‘Kill them?’

‘No, don’t hurt them. Just keep them with you. Oh, and there’s a sentry just round the corner. Take him as well – and bring me his keys.’

Dragging their terrified captives, the Ogrons disappeared around the corner.

There was a yelp and a thump and one of them returned with a bunch of keys.

‘Supremo pleased?’

‘Supremo delighted. Now, go.’

The Ogron disappeared. The Doctor waited for a moment, then went around the corner to the condemned cell. He took the syringe from its glass case, prepared it for use, and then unlocked the door and went inside.

Morbius was sitting on a bunk, head bowed. At the sight of the Doctor he snarled, ‘You!’ and bounded from the bunk, clamping his hands around the Doctor’s throat. He was appallingly strong, and the Doctor felt consciousness slipping away. He thrust the hypodermic under Morbius’s chin and heard the faint pop as it discharged. The grip around his throat slackened and Morbius slumped.

Catching the body before it fell, the Doctor stretched it out on the bunk. He slipped out into the corridor, leaving the door unlocked.

He looked up and down the corridor. ‘Come on Solon, you’ve got a job to do and time’s running out!’

He saw two figures hurrying along the corridor and slipped back out of sight.

Solon, who was clutching a large medical bag, hurried to the door of the condemned cell and opened it. The black-cloaked figure followed him inside.

Solon looked down at the unconscious figure of Morbius.

‘They have given him a sedative, so much the better.’ He opened the medical bag and groped inside.

‘How do we get him out?’ asked the black-clad figure. ‘You said you

had a plan.'

'We can't get his *body* out,' explained Solon impatiently. 'All the exits are guarded. But I can smuggle out his brain, and preserve it until I can provide a new body.'

'Preserve his brain?'

'Yes, in this mini-cryogenic chamber.' Solon held out a silver case shaped like a giant oyster. Lights flashed in a control panel set into the lid.

'You'll kill him!'

'*They* want to kill him. I shall save him.'

'You're mad,' said the black-cloaked figure. 'Do you think this is what Morbius would want? He would prefer execution! If the Time Lords kill him, he will become a martyr, an eternal symbol of his own great cause. If he dies in an escape attempt, the effect will be even greater. But this!'

'It's his only chance,' hissed Solon, hands busy inside his bag.

'Chance of what? How will he react when he finds himself a brain without a body. He'll go mad!'

'He will have a body! I, Mehendri Solon, greatest surgeon in the galaxy, will make him a new one.'

'A body like those shambling monsters you tried to rescue him with?' said the cloaked figure mockingly. 'He would prefer death.'

'*I must have the brain of Morbius!*'

'I won't permit it,' said the black-cloaked figure and reached for Solon's throat.

Solon took something metallic and whirring from the bag and slashed, and Grimoire's head leapt from his shoulders and rolled under the bunk. For a moment the headless figure stood upright, torso spouting blood, then it pitched to the ground.

Trying to make sense of what he was hearing, the Doctor peered through the half-open door. He saw a headless body in a pool of blood, and Solon bending over the unconscious Morbius, pulling on surgical gloves.

He heard the whirr of an electronic saw cutting through bone. He saw Solon produce an oyster-shaped silver case from his bag, and saw something slimy and gelatinous slip from the opened top of Morbius's head into Solon's gloved hand and then into the case.

He heard the click as the case closed, the 'clop' as the top of Morbius's skull was replaced.

Solon put the silver case into his bag, busied himself with the skull for a few minutes longer and then straightened up.

The Doctor jumped back into cover as Solon came out of the condemned cell clutching the medical bag to his chest and scuttled off down the corridor.

'So far, so good,' thought the Doctor. 'Now comes the tricky bit.'

He went into the cell, avoiding the spreading pool of blood, and examined Morbius's skull. Solon seemed to have glued the top back on, and he'd even tried to conceal the line of the join with some kind of make-up. The effect was reasonable at a casual glance, but it wouldn't stand close inspection.

The Doctor thought hard. He locked the door to the condemned cell, rolled the headless body under the bunk, opened the connecting door to the execution room and went inside. He opened the lid of the glass coffin, went back into the condemned cell, lifted Morbius's body and laid it carefully inside the vaporisation chamber.

He found a control, dimmed the lights and looked down at the body.

To his relief, the heat of Morbius's still warm body produced a slight misting of the transparent cover.

'It might pass,' he thought. 'It's got to pass.'

When President Saran, Borusa and Ratisbon arrived at the execution room with their escort of still-nervous Capitol Guards, they found the Doctor, head bowed, standing by the vaporisation chamber with the prone body of Morbius already inside.

Borusa looked round suspiciously. 'What is happening?

Where are the technicians?'

'I sent them away. Don't worry. The chamber is ready – and so, as you

can see, is Morbius.'

'Why is he already in the chamber? Why is he unconscious?

This is not proper procedure.'

The Doctor's voice was hard. 'This isn't a proper execution is it? It's a nasty little hole and corner affair, a rigged trial followed by a judicial killing. I thought the fewer people involved the better. I gave Morbius the injection and put him in the chamber myself. Let's get it over with, shall we?'

Borusa was still suspicious but fortunately there was a distraction.

Commander Hawken came along the corridor escorting two black-robed figures. One was old and wizened, the other placidly beautiful.

'What is the meaning of this?' snapped Borusa. 'This is not a public ceremony.'

'This is the Reverend Mother Maren and her – associate, Ohica. They wish to witness the death of Morbius.'

'They have the right,' said the Doctor in a tone that brooked no argument.

Maren came close to the glass coffin and looked down at Morbius. She looked hard at the Doctor, but said nothing.

The Doctor turned to Borusa, moving to obscure his view of the body. 'It's a few seconds to midnight,' he said, glancing at the wall chronometer. 'Shall we get this over with?'

'The Doctor is right,' said Ratisbon. 'There is no point in further delay.'

President Saran said, 'I concur. Let the thing be done.'

'It's the red button, there,' said the Doctor, pointing. 'Will you do the honours, Borusa, or shall I?'

Suspicious or not, Borusa wasn't going to be ousted from the limelight. It would advance his prestige, his reputation for ruthlessness, to be known to have executed Morbius with his own hand.

'I will do it,' he said. 'And with the greatest of pleasure.'

He stepped forward and jabbed at the button with his finger.

For a moment nothing happened – and the Doctor's heart sank. Any delay, any summoning of technicians, and discovery of his deception was inevitable.

There was a low hum of power and the glass coffin that was the vapourisation chamber lit up, so brightly that they stepped back, shielding their eyes.

The light faded and the chamber was empty. No trace of the body of Morbius remained, not even a sprinkling of the finest dust. 'Satisfactory,' said President Saran. He turned and marched away. After a moment, Borusa and Ratisbon followed.

Maren moved closer to the Doctor, her old eyes burning into his.

'The body in that device was already dead.'

'I know.'

'Did you kill Morbius?'

'Yes,' said the Doctor, lying without hesitation. 'I gave him a lethal injection.'

'Why?'

'Revenge. I wanted him to die by my hand.'

'I wish he had died by mine,' said Old Maren balefully. 'Still, at least we have seen the last of him.'

'That's all you know,' thought the Doctor.

Maren swept away and Ohica followed.

The Doctor detained Hawken for a moment.

'I wonder if you could do me a small favour.'

'Certainly, my dear Smith. Or is it Supremo? You're a man of many names.' Hawken sounded a little hysterical. The execution had upset him. 'Anyway, what do you want me to do?'

'There's a headless body in the room next door. It's the vampire who's been attacking your patrols. Tidy it away for me will you? And don't

ask any questions, there's a good chap...'

Chapter Nine

Departure

There was a parade next morning in the forecourt of Castle Karn. It began with a funeral ceremony for Battle-Major Streg.

Sontaran drums mingled with Draconian bagpipes as the body was carried to the battle-cruiser that was to carry him home to Sontara. There he would be buried in the soil of his home planet, and a special monument erected – a break with Sontaran custom at the personal request of the Supremo himself.

After the funeral came the dress parade. Serried ranks of Sontarans, Draconians, Ice Warriors and Cybermen, humans and humanoids were inspected by the Supremo.

He stopped and chatted with his staff officers, High Commander Aril, the Cyberleader – not much of a conversationalist – and Streg's replacement, the newly promoted Battle-Major Sark. He shook hands with General Ryon and exchanged salutes with Ice Lord Azanyr.

From time to time he stopped to talk to a soldier in the ranks, moving on after a joke, a slap on the back or a handshake

– something these soldiers remembered all their lives. Finally he addressed them, briefly as always, from the castle steps.

'I give you all my thanks for your service in our common cause. I shall always remember your courage – and the heroic sacrifice of those who cannot attend this parade. It was been an honour to serve with you. I salute you.'

He came to attention and saluted. The parade returned the salute.

The great shout of, '*Supremo! Supremo! Supremo!*' crashed out.

'For the last time,' thought Peri as the Doctor came to join her in the castle doorway. 'Or was it?'

For the moment the Doctor was quiet and remote. Then he said, 'That's over.'

'You didn't actually say goodbye to them,' said Peri.

‘Keeping your options open?’

‘It wasn’t that,’ said the Doctor quickly. ‘I didn’t think I could bear it.’

‘Perhaps it’s as well,’ said Peri. ‘I’m not sure they’d let you go.’ ‘The real question is,’ she thought, ‘can he let them go?’

The Doctor was in great demand that morning.

No less a personage than President Saran summoned him to a private interview.

‘There has been talk of an intergalactic, inter-species peacekeeping force, Doctor. A sort of United Planets Organisation. Naturally, it would have to be under Time Lord control, it could be very useful to us. And, of course, only one Time Lord could possibly lead it.’

‘It’s a great honour, Lord President. May I have time to consider?’

Borusa too took the opportunity of a private word. He was amiability itself, all hostility and suspicion forgotten – or at least laid aside.

‘We must have a long talk, Doctor. I am not sure you are making the best use of your abilities. Political changes are imminent in Gallifrey. We might do well in alliance.’

‘It’s quite a thought,’ said the Doctor. ‘As you say, we must talk.’

Finally, Ratisbon cornered him in the corridor outside the Great Hall. ‘You should seriously consider returning to Gallifrey, Doctor. A great career lies before you.’ He lowered his voice.

‘Borusa is well enough in his way, of course. But someone like yourself, with the prestige of your recent victory and a powerful armed force under your control – the possibilities are endless...’

The Doctor and Peri stood on the castle steps, surveying the busy scene below.

Debris was still being cleared, and spaceships were being repaired and restocked. The occasional spaceship took off, carrying walking wounded or mercenary prisoners away from Karn.

‘As far as I can make out,’ said the Doctor, ‘President Saran wants me to roam the galaxy with an inter-species army fighting evil – evil, of course, being defined as anything contrary to Time Lord interests. Borusa wants me to become his campaign manager and give Saran the

heave-ho – and Ratisbon wants me to stage a military *coup d'état* and make myself dictator of Gallifrey!’

‘Lots of career opportunities there, Doctor,’ said Peri.

‘Which one are you going to go for?’

The Doctor gave her an enigmatic look.

Hawken came out of the hall and hurried towards them. ‘All taken care of,’ he said. ‘Headless corpse tidied away.’

Peri looked astonished.

The Doctor said hurriedly, ‘Thank you. Thank you very much.’

‘What the devil were you up to last night?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Come off it, Smith. Several of my patrols saw you skulking about the corridors. And that body in the vaporisation chamber looked thoroughly dead to me. Oh, and two technicians and a sentry are complaining of being kidnapped by your Ogrons.’

What’s going on?’

‘Believe me, you don’t want to know,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’d like to ask another favour, though.’

Hawken looked alarmed. ‘More headless corpses?’

‘Nothing like that. You remember that blue box I had, the very first time I came here? I’d like to take a look at it.’

‘Oh, yes, now what did I do with it? Damned if I can remember. Was it in one of those towers that got demolished? It could be under a ton of rubble by now...’

He saw the appalled looks on both their faces and laughed.

‘Just my little joke, it’s perfectly safe.’

‘Most amusing. Could we see it, please?’

‘What – now?’

‘Now!’ said the Doctor firmly.

‘Oh, all right, come along.’

Hawken led them along the obscure corridors of the security section and came to a halt before a heavy door. He fished out keys and opened it, revealing a dusty store-room.

There, in the middle of a clutter of unwanted lumber, stood the TARDIS.

‘There it is,’ said Hawken. ‘Want me to organise some chaps to take it to your flagship?’

‘That won’t be necessary,’ said the Doctor. He seized Hawken’s hand and shook it. ‘Thank you. Thanks for everything.’

Hawken looked puzzled. ‘You’re talking as if this is goodbye.

Lord Delmar’s giving a celebratory dinner tonight. I’ll see you there.’

‘Right,’ said the Doctor absently.

Peri gave Hawken an impulsive peck on the cheek.

‘Goodbye, Commander.’

Hawken went back down the corridor thinking that Smith had always been a peculiar chap. Certainly gone up in the galaxy, though. One day a suspicious wanderer and suspected spy, the next a warlord consorting with presidents. Useful chap to know.

As he turned a corner he thought he heard an odd wheezing, groaning sound behind him, but he decided he must have imagined it...

Later that morning, Hawken was swooped on by a trio of tetchy Time Lords.

‘Where is the Doctor?’ asked Borusa.

‘The man you know as Smith,’ said Ratisbon.

‘The Supremo,’ said President Saran. ‘We all have important business with him and he is nowhere to be found.’

Hawken looked round. ‘Isn’t he back yet?’

‘Back from where?’ asked Borusa.

‘He was checking up on his blue box; seems to set great store by it.’

‘Blue box?’ screamed Ratisbon. ‘You gave him access to his blue box?’

‘Why not, it’s his. Brought it with him when he first came.’

‘Show us – at once!’ demanded Borusa.

Hawken led them to the store-room but of course it was empty. Only a square shape in the dust showed where the TARDIS had once stood.

The Doctor was in his study in the TARDIS, a cosy oak-panelled, book-lined room. He was sitting in a deep leather armchair by the coal fire that flickered perpetually in the old-fashioned grate. As usual, he looked immaculately Edwardian in striped trousers, fawn blazer and crisp white shirt. His fair hair looked a little spiky but he’d done his best to brush it back. He was drinking tea and leafing through his beloved first edition of *The Time Machine*.

He looked up and smiled as Peri came in. She’d bathed and changed into a white silk dress.

‘You’re looking very nice,’ he said politely.

‘You don’t look so bad yourself,’ said Peri. ‘You’re back, are you? No more Supremo?’

‘I expect he’s still in there somewhere, Peri. We need our Supremos sometimes. A Wellington for Napoleon, a Churchill for a Hitler. But, by and large, yes, you could say I’m back. What about Peri, the Scourge of Sylvana?’

Peri shuddered. ‘She’s gone – for good, I hope.’ She gave him a considering look. ‘All right, Doctor, spill it!’

‘Spill what?’

‘Hawken may not want to know but I do. What were you up to on the night of Morbius’s execution?’

To her amazement, the Doctor gave her a totally frank answer.

‘I was just making sure Solon was able to get away with stealing Morbius’s living brain before his body was vaporised.’

‘What? Why?’

‘Because that’s what had already *happened*, Peri – the first time I visited Karn – in their future and my past. By visiting it this time I crossed my own time track – a very dangerous thing to do.’

‘You did it to save my life.’

‘Maybe so. But I didn’t expect to get so – *involved* in things. If Solon had failed, the time line would have been distorted, anything might have happened.’

Peri sat down. ‘This is making my head spin.’

‘Paradoxes of time travel. Don’t worry about it.’

‘You’d visited Karn before – in your past and Karn’s future.

But what happened then still hadn’t happened when we arrived?’

‘That’s it.’

‘And you’d met Solon before?’

‘Oh yes, we spent quite a lot of time together.’

‘So why didn’t he recognise you this time?’

‘How could he? He hadn’t met me yet,’ said the Doctor blandly.

Peri drew a deep breath. ‘OK. There’s something else.’

‘What?’

‘That girl who turned up in your quarters, just after we met again.’

‘What about her?’

‘Who was she?’

‘President Makir’s daughter – and his personal emissary. She brought me a message that Makir was doing his best to raise extra troops for me, but that it was taking time.’ He gave her a reproachful look. ‘Peri, you didn’t think...’

‘No, no,’ said Peri hurriedly. ‘Just clearing up a few minor details!’ Anxious to change the subject she went on, ‘So what happened exactly

– on your first visit to Karn?’

The Doctor settled back in his chair. ‘It’s quite a story. Pour yourself some tea and I’ll tell you about it...’

Epilogue

Everything changed on Karn after the end of the Morbius war.

The soldiers all went home, lamenting their vanished Supremo.

The Castle was completely evacuated and the Hospice of Karn was no more.

Lord Delmar retired to his estates on a tropical planet to write his memoirs.

Commander Hawken became a security consultant on many planets, always proud of having known the Supremo.

The Sisterhood retired to their Temple.

These days, even the Elixir of Life seemed to be drying up.

Old Maren became increasingly paranoid, convinced that one day the Time Lords would return to steal the little that remained.

At her urging, the Sisterhood used their powers to ensure that most visiting spacecraft crashed.

Mehendri Solon lived on like a rat in the ruins of Castle Karn’s hydrogen plant, scavenging food and scientific equipment, dreaming always that one day, thanks to his efforts, Morbius would live again.

One dark and stormy night, two extraordinary figures hammered on Solon’s door – a tall curly-haired man in a floppy hat and long scarf, and a slender girl.

But that’s another story...

About the Author

Terrance Dicks joined *Doctor Who* as junior assistant trainee script editor in 1968, when they were making *The Web of Fear* and desperately trying to make a roaring Yeti sound less like a flushing lavatory. He worked on the show during the end of the Patrick Troughton years, and co-wrote *The War Games*, Troughton’s last show,

with Malcolm Hulke. He stayed on as script editor for the whole of the Jon Pertwee period, and left to write *Robot*, the first Tom Baker story (This was in accordance with an ancient *Who* tradition, which he'd just invented, that the departing script editor writes the first show of the next season.) In the years that followed he wrote a handful of *Doctor Who* scripts, finishing in 1983 with *The Five Doctors*, the programme's twentieth anniversary special.

In the early 1970s he was in at the beginning of the *Doctor Who* novelisation programme and ended up, more by luck than judgement, writing most of them – seventy-something in all. He has since written a number of *Doctor Who* 'originals', including *Exodus*, part of the opening *Timewyrm* sequence published by Virgin, and *The Eight Doctors*, the first original novel published by BBC Worldwide.

He has written two *Doctor Who* stage plays, one a flop d'estime (great reviews, poor audiences), the other a bit of a pantomime but a modest touring success. He has also written about a hundred non- *Who* books, fiction and non-fiction for young adults, but nobody ever asks about them.

In over thirty years with the Doctor he has grown older, fatter, greyer and grumpier. But not noticeably wiser.

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